

Jesus is born: Matthew & Luke's Birth Stories*

Rev. Kevin A. Ogilvie, PhD

Contents

<u>Session 1:</u>	Why these four women? Matthew 1:1-17	4
<u>Session 2:</u>	Matthew's Story of Jesus' Birth Matthew 1:18-25	7
<u>Session 3:</u>	Matthew, the Magi, Egypt and Nazareth: What's Going On? Matthew 2: 1-23	10
<u>Session 4:</u>	Luke Starts with John the Baptist Luke 1:5-56	14
<u>Session 5:</u>	Gabriel Speaks to Mary Luke 1:26-38	17
<u>Session 6:</u>	Mary Visits Elizabeth and Sings Luke 1:39-56	19
<u>Session 7:</u>	John the Baptist is Born and a Mute Sings Luke 1:57-79	22

About the author:

The Rev. Kevin A. Ogilvie, PhD is a retired pastor in the South Carolina Synod. He served three different parishes in Upstate New York and one in South Carolina. He has also served as a missionary of the ELCA to Madagascar and as President of Lutheran Theological Seminary Saskatoon (Canada). He has been an interim pastor for the synod in his retirement. Please send any questions or respectful comments to: taledadabe@gmail.com

About the Contributor for the Youth Options

Deacon Deborah Poole serves as the SC Synod Coordinator for Children and Youth. She recently retired after 30 years as Coordinator for Family Ministries at Mt. Hermon (1993-2005) and Pisgah (2005-2023) Lutheran Churches. Deborah lives in Lexington, and enjoys reading and gardening.

Scripture Studies from the South Carolina Synod

During the South Carolina Synod Assembly in 2023, a Resolution on *Living into the Unity of the Body of Christ* was presented and adopted. The hope of this resolution was to encourage our congregations to unite in the study of Scripture and renew their love for the sacred texts by taking a deeper look together at even the challenging passages that can be difficult to understand in our current contexts. We recognize that the Scriptures were originally written in Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic and that the collection of books was initially intended for people who lived several thousand years ago, but we also know that the Scriptures are God's living Word for us today. So, how can we best study Scripture and what can they mean for our growth in faith and life?

A group of leaders in the South Carolina Synod were gathered to serve as the Synod Bible Team to collaborate on ways we could fulfill the hope of the Resolution. Knowing that Bible Study is best done together and not alone, this Bible Team has worked together over the past year to create materials that can be used with small groups in any congregation. Our hope is that these studies will be a blessing to all who use them.

These Studies are being shared in two sections. Section One will be sent out in May 2024 to allow leaders to prepare for group studies that may be used beginning August 2024 through January 2025. Section Two will be shared in the Fall of 2024 to allow leaders to prepare for group studies that may be used beginning February through July 2025. In an effort to make this user friendly we did not date any of the courses. You may use them in whatever order you wish, and you may claim the flexibility to use the material in a timeline that suits the needs in your context. Each Study also includes questions and/or activities that can be used to supplement the study when offered to Youth.

The South Carolina Synod Bible Team includes: Josh Kestner, Josh Knutson, Shelley Allen, Steven Gallego, Kevin Ogilvie, Lisa Isenhower, Bobby Morris, Joanna Gragg, Libby Bedenbaugh, Arden Hallman, Heather Apel, Deborah Poole, Wayne Kannaday, Ginny Aebischer.

Section One Studies:

1. Introduction to What that Bible is and What the Bible is not
2. Themes in the Gospel according to Luke
3. What Child is This? How the Old Testament Prepares us for the Coming of God's Messiah
4. Jesus is born: Matthew and Luke's Birth Stories
5. Reading Revelation: Finding Good News in the Scariest Book of the Bible
- 6.

It has been said, "Jesus didn't even mention many of the issues that divide us, but Jesus did have something important to say about unity." (see John 17)

Blessings in your Study of Scripture,
+Bishop Ginny Aebischer

Why these four women?

Matthew 1:1-17

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, **3** and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, **4** and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, **5** and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, **6** and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, **7** and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, **8** and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, **9** and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, **10** and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, **11** and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

12 And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, **13** and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, **14** and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, **15** and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, **16** and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Theme statement

God uses scandalous and strong women to accomplish the salvation of human kind.

Exploring the Word

How closely did you read the portion of Matthew's gospel that is our lesson today? Most of us see a genealogy and think, "Oh, no! How boring!" But there is something very strange about this genealogy. Read it very, very carefully and suddenly you will blurt out, "Oh! My!" Among Jesus' ancestors are four women who are really rather odd to claim a place amongst the ancestors of the Son of God: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba).

You might ask, why the other notable women are left out. For example, there is no mention of Sarah or Rebecca! Wouldn't they have been better role models and persons

to highlight if you were writing your own genealogy? Instead, we have these four, odd women!

Tamar's story is recorded in Genesis 38. To understand the story, we need to understand the practice of Levirate marriage. A woman without producing a child had no inheritance. Only her child – preferably a son – could inherit. Without a child, the inheritance would pass to the next brother of the deceased man. When a husband died without producing an heir but their wife was still of child-bearing age, her fate was made easier by “Levirate” marriage. The next brother, according to age, would sleep with the woman for the express purpose of providing an heir to his deceased brother. Onan was the next brother to the late Er. Onan “spilled his seed on the ground” rather than provide such an heir and was punished by God for that act of greed (not an act of sex). Judah realized as his sons were dying that he needed to protect the youngest son, Shelah, and so he withheld him from Tamar. Tamar also realized that she would have nothing without a child because her own family no longer would care for her, having paid the dowry. Tamar then tricks Judah into impregnating her by playing the part of a prostitute. When the deception is discovered, he must admit that she was more righteous than him. She is a strong woman. She may have done something scandalous, but for the right reason.

You can read Rahab's story in Joshua 2 and hear again how valued the Israelites found her in Joshua 6:23. To be very honest, there is no way around this: Rahab was a prostitute! Indeed, one might even say she had the original “red light district.” (See Joshua 2:18). Because she helped the Israelites conquer Jericho, she and her family were spared. Indeed, she was quite honored!

In the very next clause of Matthew's gospel, we read about Ruth. Ruth should have been shunned for she was a Moabite! Moabites were expressly forbidden as members of the Israelite community. You can read that in Deuteronomy 23:3. Not only does she choose to remain amongst those who hate her, so that she can protect and care for her mother-in-law, Naomi, she, too, has a “Levirate” marriage to Boaz. As a “foreigner,” she should not be among Jesus' ancestors!

Finally, we have “the wife of Uriah.” You remember this story. It is all there in 2 Samuel 11. In Matthew, she is not named but we know her better as Bathsheba. We know she was an adulteress, having had relations with King David before Uriah died. And we know she was pregnant with David's child before Uriah was killed in battle. So, one of Jesus' ancestors was an adulteress!

Tamar played the harlot; Rahab was a harlot; Ruth was a detested foreigner; Bathsheba was an adulteress and probably also a foreigner. All of them were ancestors of Jesus! At the time that Matthew wrote his gospel there was some discussion of the suitability of Mary as his mother. She was young, though that was normal. More importantly, she was not fully married to Joseph when she became pregnant! We know she was a virgin from Scripture, but the neighbors didn't know that. Mary was scandalous.

Matthew includes these women in Jesus' genealogy to remind his listeners who knew their Jewish background inside out that God has used scandalous people in the past. Matthew wants his readers to know that God uses strong, even scandalous women to bring in the Kingdom. There is nothing wrong with Mary and there is nothing wrong with strong women!

While writing this Bible study, I had a repairman come to fix our HVAC system. He had a long beard and tattoos on both arms. I noticed when he put his arms up and his belly was exposed that he had a tattoo there, too. He asked me what I did before I retired and I told him I had been a parish pastor. He then told me that he had grown up in a Baptist church but about 15 years ago he stopped going. "People are just so judgmental!" he told me. Both he and his mother stopped going although his best friend was the son of a minister. His mother has tattoos, too. As we talked, he spoke about why he could never live in Los Angeles. He and his wife had taken a trip there once. There were too many homeless people. He wanted to help them all and he just didn't have the resources. Here, at least, he didn't see them so often. His heart was very big. I would love to have been the pastor of a congregation full of folk like him.

Now if Jesus had "scandalous women" in his family tree, why would we care where anybody has been? Maybe we need to understand that God uses people like that maintenance man to teach "the righteous" about grace!

Questions for Discussion

1. It is odd that Matthew includes only four women in Jesus' genealogy. Had you ever noticed this before? Why do you think that is?
2. Perhaps Tamar was doing the right thing in securing her husband's inheritance, but does it bother you that Rahab was truly a prostitute, Ruth was truly a foreigner and Bathsheba was an adulteress? Shouldn't Jesus' ancestors be pure, too? Why or why not?
3. Matthew's gospel was likely written to remind Christians of Jewish background that their "pure" lives were not so pure and that, while being Jewish was a good thing, God was doing a new thing in inviting others into the Kingdom (Matthew 28:19). What about us? Do we invite the "scandalous" to church? If so, why?
4. What could we do differently in our church to make sure people feel loved and not judged?

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, your servant Matthew, pointed out four women in Jesus' family tree, four women we have not always noticed. We know they are scandalous but if you can use

them to produce your Son our Savior, we can honor their work and we can know that you might just use us, too! Amen.

Matthew's Story of Jesus' Birth

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ *"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel" which means, "God is with us." (Isaiah 7:14)*

²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Theme statement

Matthew wants his readers and listeners to know who Jesus is: our savior and God with us!

Exploring the Word

One of the goals of this series of studies from the South Carolina Synod is to have participants look closely at the stories they think they know from Sunday School and worship services and realize there might be something else there. Very few places help us to see this as clearly as in the stories of Jesus' birth recorded in Matthew and Luke. If you read them carefully, they do not agree in their details. This should not affect our faith because neither evangelist ever claimed that their gospels were written histories of Jesus. They may not have known the details surrounding Jesus' birth, for one thing. After all, these gospels were written 75 to 120 years after Jesus was born and some of those details, unimportant to followers at the time, have been lost in the fog of time. More importantly, these gospel writers want you to know who Jesus is for us today. They write to answer the same question we have: *who is Jesus for us?*

In Matthew's gospel, Mary and Joseph seem to be living in Bethlehem and are unaware of an empire-wide census. In Luke's story, Mary and Joseph were living in Nazareth

and we never hear that they had to go to Egypt, as Matthew says. As we go along, you may discover some other inconsistencies in the story *as history*. Remember, the writer is more interested in knowing who Jesus is for the community of faith than in producing a technically accurate account. Martin Luther said that the Old Testament was “scripture” and the New Testament is “proclamation.” Keep this distinction in mind as you read these stories.

The genealogy we traced in the last lesson is Joseph’s family tree. We worry about biological lineage but in first century Palestine no one understood this. Adoption was as good as being a biological parent. Now Joseph was not initially eager to marry Mary. He, too, understood that Mary must have done something wrong! Yet Joseph has a namesake in the Old Testament: Joseph, the son of Jacob, who became the prime minister of Egypt under the pharaoh and saved his native people from starvation (Genesis 35 – 50). He did that by interpreting dreams. The father of Jesus is also an interpreter of dreams. By a dream he is first told that Mary is virtuous and that he should gladly marry her. Moreover, he is told to name the child Jesus, and then we are told what the name “Jesus” means: “God saves.” By marrying Mary and naming the child, Joseph, in effect, adopts him as his own.

Names have meaning for Matthew and the first name we have for Jesus, as we noted, means “God saves.” Jesus derives from a Greek pronunciation of that name. The old Hebrew would sound more like “Joshua,” the successor to Moses who actually brought God’s people into the Promised Land. In Madagascar there is a denomination of Christians known as *Jesosy Mamonjy*, or, literally, “Jesus Saves.” I have always thought that was redundant! Just by his name, we know that Jesus saves. But Matthew is not finished yet. He wants us to know something more about Jesus, something so important that he will quote Scripture here and say it again at the end of his gospel (Matthew 28:20): Jesus is God with us!

We have been taught to think of Jesus as fulfilling an ancient prophecy but perhaps the word “fulfill” is a little misleading. Matthew looked back to Isaiah and remembered this quote. It strengthened his argument about *who Jesus is for us* and so he stated it. It is a little different than what our Bible says the quote is and so I want to point that out just a little. First, Matthew states the quote thus:

*Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel, **which means, “God is with us.”***

But the New Revised Standard Version, which we quoted above, says in Isaiah 7:14,

Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

The most popular version of the Old Testament in the time of Matthew was a Greek translation known as the Septuagint. Our scriptures are translated from the original Hebrew, so that accounts for some of the discrepancies. Matthew would have known

the Septuagint version and probably by heart, without having to look it up. That, too, would account for some of the differences. We have the word “virgin” in both the Septuagint and Matthew. In the Hebrew version she names him Immanuel. In the Septuagint version, “you” (singular) name him Emmanuel and in Matthew’s version, “they” name him Emmanuel. (Immanuel and Emmanuel are just variant spellings.)

If you look at Isaiah 7 as a prediction of Jesus’ birth, it really will not work well. In the Hebrew, more original version, it is a young woman who is already pregnant, not a virgin. Moreover, it would not have made any sense to King Ahaz, the person to whom this information is given. He was afraid that there were three kings about to make war with him over an alliance against another, more powerful ruler. He could see his little kingdom of Judah being obliterated and he was nervous. Because of this, Isaiah gives him a sign saying essentially, “You see this young woman who is pregnant? Well, before her child is old enough to know good from evil (around 4), the kings whom you fear will be gone and she will give the child the name, ‘God is with us’ in thanksgiving.” If what Isaiah told King Ahaz was, “In 750 years Jesus will be born and you will be saved,” then King Ahaz might have continued to be frightened!

Nonetheless, when Matthew saw this verse, he knew that Jesus is *God with us* and he wanted to point out that in the past God has been with his people and he will be with us all the way through. Now that is truly good news!

Questions for Discussion

1. Have you ever noticed that the birth stories in Matthew and Luke are not exactly same? How can two authors in the New Testament disagree? Can we trust them then?
2. How do you understand the difference between what we try to write as objective history and a document written to strengthen the faith of its hearers?
3. “Jesus” means “God saves.” How have you come to know Jesus as your savior?
4. Matthew did not use the Old Testament to “predict” Jesus’ birth but rather to reinforce who Jesus is for his community: “God with us.” How do Christians read the Old Testament? (Hint: Luther said that the Bible, like the manger, contains Christ.)
5. Jesus is “God with us” at the beginning and the end of his gospel. Is Jesus “God with us” today? If so, how?

Closing Prayer

We sing in Advent, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel” because we know you are always with us. We know you are our savior and even your name

proclaims that to us, O Jesus. In our baptisms, you have put your name on us and claimed us as your own. Let us live that truly each and every day. Amen.

Matthew, the Magi, Egypt and Nazareth: What's Going On?

Matthew 2: 1-23

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, **2** asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage." **3** When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; **4** and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. **5** They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd^[d] my people Israel.'"

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. **8** Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." **9** When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. **11** On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." **14** Then Joseph^[h] got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, **15** and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. **17** Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ “A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰ “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” ²¹ Then Joseph^[k] got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.”

Theme Statement

Jesus relives Israel’s history as preparation for his ministry. The evil rulers of this age seek to destroy him, but he goes away and comes back. Joseph is a model Jew. Magi are model Gentiles. The Magi must come to the Jews even with the star leading them because you can only know who Jesus is by revelation!

Exploring the Word

We have already noted in this study that Matthew and Luke do not agree in the details of what was happening at the time of Jesus’ birth. Luke has Mary and Joseph leave Nazareth and go to Bethlehem where Jesus is born. They then return via Jerusalem without incident. Matthew starts with Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem and then, fearing King Herod after Jesus is born, they flee to Egypt before settling in Nazareth, without passing through Jerusalem. So what is Matthew trying to tell us about who Jesus is?

Both gospels tell us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, like his ancestor King David. So, Jesus is of the royal lineage of David! For both writers this is an important point: Jesus is legitimately royal. When God promised King David that his “house” would be established forever, he meant it! (2 Samuel 7:11). Jesus, his royal descendent, rules now forever.

Matthew writes his gospel for a Jewish audience who are likely not winning any more converts among other Jews. Luke, we will see, writes his gospel for a primarily Gentile (non-Jewish) audience. For the Jewish audience of Matthew time is closing their options. They must be convinced from their heritage and from the Scriptures that God wants them to open their preaching to Gentiles. That is a hard pill to swallow, but Matthew gives them all the right medicine.

First, Matthew backs up Jesus’ royal heritage not only by the fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem but also by quoting the prophet Micah (5:2) which confirms that the new king was to be born there. Before that, however, Magi come from the East looking for the

new king whom they had determined was to be born through their astrological science. They have the audacity to ask King Herod where he is! Herod was famous for being a dangerous man. The Roman Emperor Augustus once said of him, "I would rather be Herod's pig than his son!" when he heard that Herod had had his own sons put to death rather than face a possible challenge to his throne. Perhaps the Magi did not know much about him.

But why, if they were following a star, did they have to stop in Jerusalem and ask anyone at all? And why, once they had the answer, did the star begin to lead them again? We think that we can know something without God telling us, without the gift of revelation. All these Magi could know was that a new king had been born. They could not know where to look because God only reveals things through his people and through his Word. So the scribes and the chief priests had to be consulted. Once that happened, the star could move on! But now King Herod knew, too!

We do not have any historical evidence that the children two and under in Bethlehem were slaughtered but we can believe that Herod was capable of that. He killed his own children who were in-line to rule in his stead. He could not, would not, have allowed another pretender to his throne to survive. The Magi, being wise men, could interpret dreams and so God revealed to them Herod's intentions. And Joseph, also being a wise man like his Old Testament namesake, understood from a dream it was time to get his family safe in Egypt. Matthew sees the hand of God in this as Jesus re-lives Israel's history by finding safety as a refugee in Egypt before making his way to live and grow in Nazareth.

We want to return to think about Nazareth but before we do, we should note that Matthew never tells us how many Magi there were. Tradition tells us three, however we just do not know. The tradition that these astrologers were kings, we likely get from Psalm 72:10-11

May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
 render him tribute,
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
 bring gifts.
May all kings fall down before him,
 all nations give him service.

And that they rode camels and gave gifts of gold and frankincense we can find in Isaiah 60:6.

A multitude of camels shall cover you,
 the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
 all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
 and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

This story of the Magi seems to be reminiscent of the Balaam and Balak story in Numbers 22-24. A quote from this story might grab our attention. Balaam gives his second oracle:

He has not beheld misfortune in Jacob;
nor has he seen trouble in Israel.
The LORD their God is with them,
acclaimed as a king among them.
God, who brings them out of Egypt,
is like the horns of a wild ox for them. (Numbers 23:21-22)

Finally, let us turn to one more title for Jesus that Matthew gives us: “He will be called a Nazorean.” (Matthew 2:23b) Let us be a little honest: this one is a stretch. Matthew is impressed by the fact that Jesus grew up in Nazareth. In John’s gospel, Nathaniel is not at all impressed that Jesus grew up in Nazareth, saying “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46) But Matthew, even if he stretches the word a little, makes the connection for his audience that Jesus is God’s chosen one. One can see it on three levels. First, Jesus grew up in Nazareth. That is just a fact. Second, like Samson and Samuel, Jesus is dedicated to the Lord (a Nasorean), although we do not hear of any special diet or clothing like we do with John the Baptist. And third, Jesus comes from the “branch of Jesse” to be a royal descendent. In Hebrew, the word for branch is “*neser*.” Whatever you want to believe of all this is okay. Matthew only wants you to know that this Jesus relives Israel’s history, this Jesus is royal, this Jesus will bless us all.

Questions for Discussion

1. Think about how you would tell someone who Jesus is for you today. Would you use the model of monarchy and Jewish ancestry? How would you tell the world about Jesus?
2. Matthew wrote his gospel for a community of Jewish believers. Think about where you live and whom you live amongst. What would you emphasize in your story of Jesus?
3. The Magi needed to hear from Jews where their king was to be born. We turn to Scripture to know how God has acted in the past so that we can identify the movements of God today. Do you agree that revelation is more important for faith than science?
4. Matthew found support for his understanding of who Jesus is by searching the Old Testament. How do you think the Old and New Testaments relate to each other for us?

5. Read the story of Balaam and Balak in Numbers 22-24, if you have time. Balaam could only bless God's people. Do we expect Jesus to curse our enemies like Balak?
6. It may be a stretch to put the words "Nazareth," "Nasorean," and "neser" (Hebrew: branch) together. Does it help you know who Jesus is for us anyway?

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, you revealed your Son to be our king through the Scriptures to foreign-born wisemen. Help us always to respect those who seek the Lord wherever they are from and to proclaim him ourselves as our King. Amen.

Luke Starts with John the Baptist

Luke 1:5-25

⁵In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." ¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." ¹⁹The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that

he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³ When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴ After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵ “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Theme Statement

Jesus’ family includes John the Baptist whose parents resemble Abraham and Sarah, having a miraculous birth of their own.

Exploring the Word

In Matthew, Mark, and John’s gospels we learn very little about the origins of John the Baptizer. Luke, however, tells us his “back story.” We learn that Zechariah and Elizabeth are his parents. They were righteous, holy people. Both of them were from priestly classes and the vision that starts the whole process happens during Zechariah’s term in the Temple. Not only does the angel Gabriel tell Zechariah that they will have a son, but he also tells him what kind of person he will be: a Nazirite! Nazarites were people dedicated to the Lord and as such they had special diets and wore unusual clothes. They were not supposed to drink wine lest they become intoxicated nor cut their hair. (Numbers 6). This, of course, would be both good news and bad news for Zechariah. A Nazirite could not touch the dead and so they could not help with the funeral rites for a parent. For a people whose worth was bound up in children, however, this was good news indeed.

Luke tells us that Zechariah doubts Gabriel’s message and so he is struck mute, unable to speak and unable to give the blessing that the people waiting outside the Holy of Holies had come to expect. In Zechariah’s case, his doubt is punished. Later, in Mary’s case, her hesitation is not taken as true doubt. Blessings are important. We say one at the end of every service. Often, we use the one found in Numbers (6:24-26). Luke is a good story-teller. There is no other benediction given until Jesus gives it in Bethany at the end of the story (Luke 24:50).

Now Gabriel is an angel any good Jew or Bible-reader should know. Very few angels are named in Scripture, but Gabriel is an exception. We have heard of him before. In the Book of Daniel, Gabriel interprets Daniel’s dream (8:15-26) of the end of time. More importantly, Gabriel appears to Daniel at the time of the evening sacrifice later on (9:16) and Daniel is rendered mute (10:15). God uses the same messenger (angel) to deliver a message to his faithful servant, Zechariah. And later on, Gabriel will deliver the joyful news to Mary.

Names always have meaning. Zechariah is told to name his new son John. John has two meanings depending upon whether you are Greek-speaking or Hebrew-speaking.

In Greek, John means “Joy or gladness;” in Hebrew, John means “God has given grace.”

The Word for Today

Have you ever been visited by an angel, named or not? In our modern age it is often considered not very “scientific” to say so. Years ago, I met a woman who had had some mental health challenges in her early married life. She overcame them. Her son, whom she loved with all her heart, had more severe challenges however. At twenty-one he was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder. In addition, he had become an alcoholic and there was, at the time, another concern. This woman and her husband were not only members but officers in a support group for each of these issues. One day, the husband came to see me because he was becoming afraid for his wife’s mental health again. You see, when her first mental health challenge had begun, she had seen Jesus standing at the foot of her bed one night. He never spoke. He was just there. They went the next day to the church and told the pastor about it who immediately told her that she was losing her mind...and so she did.

I went by to see the couple one afternoon. What I told her may surprise you a bit. I told her that she may well have seen Jesus. Zechariah, after all, saw Gabriel! Abraham had three angelic visitors. It is not so strange to believe. I also told her that if she did not resign her positions in the various support groups to which they belonged, she was not giving new people a chance to rise to the occasion. She lived out the rest of her life mentally healthy.

God speaks to us today. Sometimes, perhaps, God uses angels. More often, God speaks to us through Scripture and through preaching, teaching and the conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters like you.

Questions for Discussion

1. Today we might be a little frightened by someone who never cut their hair nor took a strong drink. Does the discipline of refraining from alcohol, eating a special diet or wearing special clothing help a person to think more clearly about what God is doing in the world? How would you respond?
2. Most of us know the Aaronic Benediction (Numbers 6:24-26) by heart. We yearn for God’s blessing and often wait until the end of the service just to hear it said. Why is hearing God’s blessing over us so important?
3. John means “joy” (in Greek) or “God’s gift of grace” (in Hebrew). Does your name mean something? Have you given a name because you like what it means? In Baptism, God put God’s Name on you. What does it mean to have God’s Name?

4. Do angels appear to the faithful today? How do you hear the Good News that God cares for and wants to use you?

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, you struck Zechariah mute and unable to utter the benediction because he doubted. Give us faith without doubt that we might be able always to speak good news and blessing to others. Amen.

Gabriel Speaks to Mary

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."^[b] ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"^[c] ³⁵ The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born^[d] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Theme Statement

Mary is the "favored one." In Luke's gospel, she is clearly a disciple of Jesus because she accepts the impossible thing which God asks of her.

Exploring the Word

As we have seen before, different gospel writers have somewhat different takes on people and places. That is particularly clear here in Luke's story of Mary and her acceptance of this very important role in salvation history. Luke thinks of Mary as a disciple. Indeed, Luke essentially lets his readers know that she is the first disciple as she accepts what God has proposed to her through Gabriel: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." But Mark has a somewhat different

take on Mary. In his book, Mark notes that Jesus' family thinks he has lost his mind: "When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." (3:21). Later, when his family come looking for him to bring him home, Jesus is not complimentary of his mother: "And [Jesus] replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (3:33-35). While for Mark, discipleship is more important than blood, for Luke, Mary, even as a blood relative, is a faithful disciple.

What is important to both writers is that a disciple accepts whatever burden God puts upon them for the sake of bringing good news to others. For some people, that may mean following in the footsteps of a beloved family member. For other people, it may mean rejecting family all together!

Gabriel explains to Mary who Jesus will be for the world but he starts his announcement with a very familiar call for her not to be afraid. Being visited by an angel should produce some fear in us. Even though the announcement is of good news, fear is the normal response when God is involved. We are so used to hearing these stories we may forget that when God speaks to us, we tremble. So all angels implore their hearers not to be afraid!

Other Biblical women have had wonderous births as well. The angels said to Sarah, "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" (Genesis 18:14) Or Hannah, like Mary, says to Eli, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." (1 Samuel 1:18). Mary is in good company and understands just how wonderful this good news is for her.

The Word for Today

When we doubt what God has promised to do for us, we suffer. Zechariah doubted and was struck mute until much later in the story. Mary questioned the mechanism, but did not doubt what God had promised to do. That is one explanation as to why Zechariah was punished for his question and Mary was applauded for hers. We think that the human mind is to remain outside of discipleship but even in this most sacred moment, Mary has a concern. She wants what God has promised to happen but she is unsure of the process, especially because it seemingly involves a miracle. Perhaps for Zechariah there was some possibility that Elizabeth would get pregnant. There was no need to question the process, it was simply unusual. God calls us generally to use our brains in thinking through issues but not to use our minds to put down or dismiss what God intends.

Gabriel told Mary about her relative, Elizabeth's, pregnancy. It was not known to her before. Then Gabriel tells Mary something that we too often forget, "For nothing will be impossible with God." We tend to think that when doors close, the matter is settled. On the other hand, God may not have closed the door! Remaining positive is the face of adversity, is not easy but Christians are often called to do it.

Questions for Discussion

1. How is having four different gospels that do not always agree on the details helpful for us today?
2. Tell about your family. Were they Christian and to be emulated? Were they non-Christian and you have, even painfully, moved away from their practice?
3. Have you ever chosen a position on a matter of faith knowing that it might cause friction in your family? Can you tell about it?
4. When God speaks to us, why should we be afraid? Does knowing that true angels always dispel fear first help you understand to whom to listen?
5. How does knowing that “nothing will be impossible with God” help you?

Closing Prayer

Good and gracious God, help us to remember always that you do not want us ever to fear your call and that nothing you call us to is ever impossible with you. Amen.

Mary Visits Elizabeth and Sings

Luke 1:39-56

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

- ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”
⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Theme Statement

Two women discuss with joy the complete upset of the world. One even sings about it and we continue to sing about it today.

Exploring the Word

Luke continues his extended version of Jesus’ birth by intertwining the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah with that of Mary. Remember, Elizabeth is too old by common logic to have children so the couple remains childless. Gabriel has revealed to Mary that her relative is pregnant and Mary hastens to greet her and congratulate her. Without yet having been told about Mary’s pregnancy, the fetus in Elizabeth’s womb jumps for joy at the sound of Mary’s greeting. Joy is the watchword of the day. Neither woman is worried about the difficulties of pregnancy, though especially Elizabeth, at her advanced age, ought to be. Instead, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, makes a confession of faith: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?”

Among Lutherans in particular, and Protestants in general, Mary is often thought of as the most “Catholic” of the followers of Jesus. Our prejudice shows just a little. Martin Luther once wrote a pamphlet on the song Mary sang, the Magnificat (Latin from the first line of the song, “My soul magnifies the Lord...”). He also portrays her strongly as a person of faith, as one whose life and actions we should emulate. Mary accepted the will of the Lord. That seems so simple and yet it is so very hard. While Lutherans do not pray to Mary so that she might intercede with God for us, we do honor her and think highly of her. It may be time for us to think again about how important her role was in bringing us salvation. Elizabeth says it this way, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?”

Luke places on the lips of Mary a song that may have been popular at the time when he wrote. It is still extremely popular among Christians. We sing it for *Evening Prayer* in our *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. We sing hymn versions of it often, like the *Canticle of the Turning* (ELW 723). Because these words come from Scripture, they are even more important to us. But if you pay attention to the words, you might be in for a shock! We get that God’s mercy endures “from generation to generation.” We have no problem

with “he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.” But when he says that “he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly,” things start to get a little uncomfortable. Moreover, “he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” This is the complete overthrow of the world as we know it! Living in a world that has been turned upside down makes us think again about how God wants the world to be. Singing this song with Mary is a very political act!

The Word for Today

Martin Luther, in his pamphlet on the Magnificat, says something very thought provoking indeed. He says that there is something that God cannot do! Think about that for a moment. God, who is capable of doing anything and everything, is limited by one thing. Hearing this for the first time can be very upsetting. God is all powerful; God can do anything, right? Luther says that God cannot look up or side-to-side. Think about that for a moment. God cannot look up! As a matter of fact, God is always with a crook in the neck because God cannot look up since there is nothing above God! God cannot look side-to-side because there is nothing equal to God. God, instead, looks down and – here is the important part – God is pleased to look down.

Luther draws this conclusion from the simple fact that God cannot look up: God is content to look down upon us. If God is content to look down upon us, never trying to better God’s own station in life, then we can, too. If our seeking a “higher position” is not for the betterment of others, why would we do it? God does not.

If you believe that God has turned the world over by caring more for the poor than for the rich, the commoner rather than the powerful, then looking down is a godly act and we can engage in it too.

Questions for Discussion

1. John the Baptist will be supplanted by Jesus but in Luke’s Gospel, even before he is born, John is happy about that. Tell of a time you were happy because someone else succeeded where you had not.
2. John is a Baptist, Mary a Roman Catholic, Paul is a Lutheran. Why do we make such silly statements? Are there characters in the Bible that we tend to pay less attention to because we think they are not “ours”?
3. Think of hymns that you love singing. Have you thought about their message? What happens when that message may even undermine your own standing in the world and raise someone else up?
4. Martin Luther tells us that God cannot look up. Have you ever thought about things God can and cannot do? Why would this one be important for you?

Closing Prayer

Our souls magnify the Lord and our spirits rejoice in God, our Savior. With Elizabeth, we joyfully meet others who carry the Word and spread joy. May we, O Lord, always find joy in our lot for each person has the chance to sing your praises always. Amen.

John the Baptist is Born and a Mute Sings

Luke 1:57-79

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." ⁶¹ They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." ⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior^[a] for us
in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

⁸⁰ The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Theme Statement

Living according to God's promises, we are set free.

Exploring the Word

Struck mute for doubting Gabriel's announcement to him, Zechariah's tongue is freed after he writes that the child will be named John and not after him. All of this caused a great commotion among the people. They were overjoyed for the couple who they presumed would never have children. Zechariah, by agreeing with God's command given by Gabriel, is set free to be heard praising God. Like Mary's song, the Magnificat, we often sing this song of Zechariah's for Morning Prayer in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. We know it by its Latin name, the Benedictus ("Blessed be the Lord..."). Once again, Luke masterfully takes a hymn – known or perhaps composed – and puts it on the lips of Zechariah. The first half of the song praises God for keeping promises. God has saved God's people by raising up another Davidic king; God has kept his promise to Abraham; God has and will rescue us from all our enemies.

Then Zechariah's song turns a bit more personal. He refers to John the Baptist in particular and speaks about the kind of work John will do. He will "prepare the way of the Lord," as it says in Isaiah 40:3. He will offer "the knowledge of salvation" and the "forgiveness of sins."

Zechariah was a priest and the most important work of a priest is to pronounce a blessing. Mute, Zechariah was unable to do his job. Now Zechariah sings with all his might pronouncing a blessing upon the people, upon John and upon Jesus. Perhaps better said, Jesus is that blessing and Zechariah thanks God for him.

The Word for Today

In the old *Lutheran Book of Worship*, the service of Morning Prayer (Matins) did something interesting with this song of Zechariah we call the Benedictus. When the address changes from the general to the specific, when the song moves to "You, my child, shall be called...", the song shifts from everyone singing, to a soloist. We understand that the song in Luke speaks directly to John but in the service of Morning Prayer, the song speaks to you. "**You**, my child, will be called the prophet of the Most High...". The composer for this piece wants to remind each of us that we are called to sing God's praises, to "go before the Lord and prepare his way...". Each of us has the opportunity to tell others of Jesus love and to pronounce forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a hard thing to offer. It is so hard, in fact, the general public was amazed when, in 2015, the families of those shot by a white supremacist at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston forgave the shooter! It is a hard thing to do to forgive someone who has killed your loved one.

In 2006, a shooter entered a school for Amish girls in West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Six girls lost their lives and others were injured. That same day, the grandfather of one of those girls, a member of the Amish community, said, "We must not think evil of this man". Another Amish father noted, "He had a mother and a wife and a soul and now he's standing before a just God". Later, they visited the wife of the deceased perpetrator and offered her comfort and forgiveness. This is only possible if you know Christ, if you know and feel deep in your own bones the forgiveness that Christ has offered us. Let's remember that when we sing this song!

Questions for Discussion

1. What is your favorite hymn and why?
2. Christians make a huge deal out of the forgiveness of sins as the mark of salvation. What does that mean to you?
3. One Lutheran bishop likes to say that there is an "ontological" (at the core of one's being) change at ordination: it is impossible for a pastor to utter a word cursing another. A pastor can only offer blessings. Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. If you lost a loved one by violence, could you forgive the perpetrator? Why do you think the people at Mother Emmanuel or in West Nickel Mines were able to do so?

Closing Prayer

Forgive us our failures, O Lord! We fail so often to forgive from our hearts those who, we believe, have harmed us. We pray each day, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Help us to mean what we say and live as forgiven sinners forgiving others. Amen.

Luke Tells us that Jesus is Born

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,^[a] the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,^[b] praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”^[c]

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Theme statement

Jesus is born in royal David’s city, not in lodging like a visitor but in a home. He is laid in a manger where God sustains his people. His swaddling clothes were common even for royalty.

Exploring the Word

Luke loves irony. Think about how he tells us this story. The very first thing we hear is that the Roman Emperor, Augustus, has ordered a census. Now you should know that

census-taking was not something well received by Jews of the time. They remembered David's census (2 Samuel 24) that ended badly. Now we do not have a record of Emperor Augustus having issued a call for a census but we know from other sources that Quirinius, when he was governor around 6 A.D., did. It led to the formation of the Zealot party later on. One thing we do know about this story is that while we cannot get exact dates from the history, we can hear Luke laughing! After all, the most powerful person in the known world, at that time, from his capital city, issued an edict that had the most powerful person in the universe born in his royal city.

So often we see Christmas programs that have an innkeeper who is unfeeling and harsh. Now if you read the story closely, then you see that there is no innkeeper in the story. Instead, all we hear is that "there was no place for them in the inn." Usually, we think that this is because the innkeeper was so hard-hearted but the text never says that. It does not even say that the fact that they are not staying in an inn is a bad thing! What if, instead, Luke knew Jeremiah 14:8: "O hope of Israel, its savior in time of trouble, why should you be like a stranger in the land, like a traveler turning aside for the night?" Only people passing through, only people who do not belong, stay in inns. Jesus, according to Luke, is one of us. Indeed, he is born in our living room! Stables were part of a house at the time. Just as you might keep your animals safe, you can keep a young family safe, too.

The two most important things about Jesus' birth, according to Luke, have to do with what he wore and where he slept. You and I might tell something about the birth: how big the child was, what color his hair or eyes were, if mother and child are healthy. Luke, however, tells us what he was wearing and where he slept. So why does Luke tell us this?

First, let us address the clothes. We learn from Luke and the shepherds learn from the angel that the baby is wrapped in bands of cloth, what we used to call "swaddling clothes." Today, we might wrap the child up in a receiving blanket after putting on a onesie. By the way, this was how all children at the time were clothed: in bands of cloth! So why might this be so important a detail that Luke repeats himself? In Chapter 7 of the Book of Wisdom in what we generally call the Apocrypha (those texts not thought of as Scripture but still important), King Solomon says:

I also am mortal, like everyone else,
a descendant of the first-formed child of earth;
and in the womb of a mother I was molded into flesh,
² within the period of ten months, compacted with blood,
from the seed of a man and the pleasure of marriage.
³ And when I was born, I began to breathe the common air,
and fell upon the kindred earth;
my first sound was a cry, as is true of all.
⁴ I was nursed with care in swaddling cloths.
⁵ For no king has had a different beginning of existence;
⁶ there is for all one entrance into life, and one way out.

By emphasizing what Jesus was wearing, Luke reminds his readers that Jesus is truly like us, fully human.

But then why was Jesus laid in a manger? First, remember what a manger is: a crib, a cow's feed trough. This, too, is so important to Luke that he repeats himself and the angel gives this as a sign to the shepherds, though it seems like such a small detail. At the very beginning of the Book of Isaiah we read in the third verse: "The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." Do you want to know where Jesus is? Jesus is in our home, he is where ox and ass feed. Israel now knows where to find him. If you ever want to find Jesus, he is where God feeds his people!

The Word for Today

Luke tells us of the shepherds, after they had seen the child: ¹⁷ "they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them." For Luke, these were the first preachers. They did not have a particularly exciting message as far as the world understands it: a child, dressed like any other child, has been born in David's royal city and he is sleeping in a manger. You and I know that this Jesus is the savior of the world. You and I know that sleeping in a cow's feed trough means that we can find God anytime we need. When you tell someone about Christmas, don't focus on the angels, the glory, the miraculous census even. Focus instead on the common. In Jesus, God has chosen to live among us where we live, to dress as we dress, and to be available to us always. That is great news!

Questions for Discussion

1. In Genesis 50:20 we read of Joseph saying to his repentant brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today." The emperor does God's bidding and makes Bethlehem the capital of the universe. Can you think of other times in your experience where God has used something evil for good?
2. If there was no evil innkeeper, but rather Jesus was born among us as one of us, what might that mean for how we treat each other?
3. Jesus was dressed as all children are dressed at birth. When you think about God-in-Christ coming to you, does it matter?
4. Tell of a time when you understood where to find God?

5. All of us are called upon to witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus in some way. Does knowing that it may seem silly to others matter?

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you came among us as one of us. We know that we can always find you for you have promised to be present to us in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Ox and ass may not know where to find their next meal, but we know that your salvation is always available to us. Amen.

Youth Options for this Course

Created by Deborah Poole

Jesus is Born: Matthew & Luke's Birth Stories

SESSION 1

The first thing most people notice when they read the genealogies is they have different names. The first appears in Matthew and starts with Abraham. The second is in Luke and starts with Adam.

First, we need to look at who these books were written to. Matthew was written to the Jews, and he wanted to prove Jesus was the coming Messiah. That is why so much of Matthew says "This happened to fulfill what was written in _____." So, when Matthew writes Jesus' genealogy he starts with Abraham where the promise started. God promised Abraham his descendants would bless the nations, and that's what Jesus did. It emphasizes the royal line Jesus is descended from. Finally, it ends with Joseph, the adopted father of Jesus.

Luke by contrast is written to the Gentiles and Luke emphasizes Jesus is for everyone. So, Luke goes back to Adam and starts with Adam to show this is not just a weird Jewish thing, but for everyone. His lineage is traced to Mary (this is getting into church tradition, and I'm sure you could argue for switching these two).

1. What do you think Matthew thought it was important to list our Jesus' genealogy?
2. What observations do you have about his lineage? Is there anything interesting about it?
3. What women are included in the list?
4. Why do you think these women and only these women are included?
5. What can we learn from the fact that these women are Jesus' ancestors?

Activity:

Using poster board large paper, work together to illustrate Jesus' "family tree."

SESSION 2

Matthew and Luke give different perspectives – it is beautiful that the Bible complements itself in the way it does. For example, in Matthew and Luke we don't read two identical word-for-word accounts. Rather, we read complementing perspectives with different information. Luke focuses on the angel's encounter with Mary while Matthew focuses on the angel's encounter with Joseph. We can have some insight into what each were thinking and feeling and, in the end, we have a much fuller picture.

In Jewish culture two families would enter into a marriage agreement. When they do so, the son and daughter would be considered husband and wife. But they were not permitted to have sex yet. The man would be expected to build a house and prepare the home for his bride. She, in the meantime, would wait for him to finish and have all things ready. When the man's father gave his stamp of approval on the house, then he would go and get his wife and they would have a big wedding ceremony and then

finally consummate the marriage. Mary and Joseph were already betrothed. They would be looked at as husband and wife. But they hadn't had sex yet and were not allowed to do so. It was then that Joseph found out Mary was pregnant. The text simply mentions he was "found to be with child." How did he find out? However he found out, he must have been quite surprised and upset.

Verse 19 – from this verse we see Joseph's good character. He was surely disappointed and upset. It seems he didn't believe Mary's story. But then who could blame him for not believing it? But though he must have been very disappointed, he didn't seek revenge. He didn't desire to publicly shame or punish Mary. He didn't try to take out his hurt feelings on her.

Joseph obeyed. It wasn't an easy task. It came with lots of potential trials and challenges. Joseph didn't rationalize away his dream. He believed in faith. And he acted on it.

- What lessons do we learn from him.

The birth of Jesus is relevant for teenagers in social media culture because it reminds us of the importance of humility and selflessness in our relationships with others. In today's world, it can be easy to get caught up in the pursuit of likes, followers, and validation from others on social media. But the story of Jesus' birth teaches us that true fulfillment and happiness come from putting others first and being humble in our interactions with them.

The birth of Jesus also reminds us that we are not alone, and that God is with us, no matter what challenges we may face. In a world where we are constantly connected to others through technology, it can be easy to feel isolated and alone. But the story of Jesus' birth reminds us that God is always with us, and he loves us unconditionally.

Activity:

Have a nativity scene scavenger hunt. Divide into teams and find the items that complete the reading in Mathew. Once you've found them, share what each item represents in the story of Jesus' birth.

SESSION 3

Today, we embark on a journey through the Matthew 2: 1-23 diving deep into the intriguing account of the Magi and their pursuit of the newborn King. This passage holds significant relevance for teenagers like yourselves as you seek to grow in your faith. In a world filled with distractions and competing influences, it's crucial to discover how the story of the Magi can inspire us to live out our faith boldly and to seek after Jesus with an unwavering commitment. Just as the Magi followed the star to find Jesus, we too can find direction in our lives by following Him.

Read Matthew 2:1-2

The birth of Jesus took place in Bethlehem during the reign of King Herod.

Wise men from the East noticed a remarkable star and recognized it as a sign of the birth of the long-awaited Messiah, the King of the Jews.

Their desire was not only to find Jesus but also to worship Him.

1. What do you think motivated the Magi to undertake such a long journey to find Jesus?

2. How does their pursuit of Jesus challenge us to seek Him with the same level of dedication and passion?
3. In what ways can we worship Jesus today?

Read Matthew 2:3-8

King Herod's reaction to the news of the Messiah's birth was one of fear and insecurity. He sought counsel from the religious leaders who pointed him to the prophecy of Micah, foretelling the birthplace of the Messiah as Bethlehem.

The religious leaders possessed knowledge but lacked the faith and eagerness of the Magi to genuinely seek Jesus.

1. Why do you think King Herod and the religious leaders responded differently to the news of the Messiah's birth compared to the Magi?
2. How does this passage emphasize the importance of seeking wisdom and fulfillment in Jesus rather than relying solely on human knowledge or power?
3. In what ways can we seek Jesus with genuine passion and eagerness, just like the Magi?

Read Matthew 2:9-12

The star reappeared, guiding the Magi to the exact location where Jesus was. Their joy was immeasurable as they encountered Jesus face-to-face and worshiped Him.

Heeding a divine warning in a dream, they returned home by an alternate route, bypassing Herod.

1. How do the actions of the Magi demonstrate true worship and surrender?
2. In what ways can we express our worship to Jesus in our daily lives?
3. What significance do the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh hold, and how can we apply their symbolism to our lives today?

Activity

In this game, we'll simulate the journey of the Magi as they followed the star to find Jesus. Divide the group into teams and provide each team with a set of clues. The teams must decipher the clues and follow them to different locations, eventually reaching the "star" (a designated spot) where they'll find a small treasure. The team that successfully reaches the star first wins the game. This game encourages teamwork, problem-solving, and perseverance, all while reminding us of the Magi's journey and our own pursuit of Jesus.

SESSION 4

Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were Jews who patiently waited for God to rescue and restore his people. Zechariah was a priest, and both he and his wife were from the priestly line of Aaron. Though married for many years, this couple had never had a child. Not only was this personally disappointing for Zechariah and Elizabeth others saw it as shameful. Jewish society at that time looked down on people who could not have children. They unfairly assumed God was not pleased with them and was consequently withholding the blessing of children.

The priestly groups took turns in temple duties. Zechariah's group was serving at this time. Within the group, the priests chose lots (similar, in effect, to drawing straws or

rolling dice) to decide who was to perform specific temple duties. In today's story, Zechariah's responsibility was to burn incense inside the temple. While the priest burned incense, he was to pray. The people worshipping outside in the temple court were to pray also.

Zechariah was supposed to be alone in the temple, but as he prayed, he was suddenly aware of an angel standing near him at the right of the altar. Sensing Zechariah's fright, the angel told him not to fear. God had heard Zechariah's prayer for the salvation of Israel.

Zechariah and Elizabeth's personal prayers were to be answered as well. His wife would give birth to a son filled with the Holy Spirit. They were to name him John (which means "the Lord is gracious").

Poor Zechariah. It was all too wonderful to believe, and he questioned the angel. (For this reason, Zechariah was struck voiceless. He left the temple and returned to Elizabeth. She became pregnant.

Activity: Picto-phone

This is a hybrid of "telephone" and "Pictionary." Students receive a stack of papers or note cards. They will begin by writing a word or phrase pertaining to the story. Every student will then pass the entire stack to the person next to them. That person reads the phrase, moves the card to the back of the pile, and draws a picture representing the phrase. The pile moves again, and the next person looks at the picture, moves the card to the back, and writes what they think the picture represents. This continues, alternating drawing and writing, until the pile makes it back to the first writer, who can watch how the story transformed.

SESSION 5

It's essential to provide our teenagers with lessons that not only enrich their understanding of the scriptures but also resonate with the unique challenges and experiences they face in their daily lives. The passage of Luke 1:26-38 holds profound significance for teenagers as it introduces them to the miraculous conception of Jesus and the unwavering faith of Mary. This lesson will help teenagers grow in their faith by exploring the themes of obedience, faith, and the power of God's plan, all within a context that speaks directly to their hearts and minds.

Read Luke 1:26-29

The passage sets the stage for the miraculous encounter between Mary and the angel Gabriel. Mary's initial reaction reflects natural human apprehension when faced with the unexpected and divine.

1. Put yourself in Mary's shoes – how would you feel if you were visited by an angel with such an extraordinary message?
2. Why do you think Mary was described as "highly favored" by the angel?
3. How can we apply Mary's response to the unexpected to our own lives?

Read Luke 1:30-33

The angel reassures Mary and reveals the divine plan for her to conceive and bear the son of God. The prophecy of Jesus' greatness and eternal reign is foretold.

1. How do you think Mary must have felt upon hearing about the extraordinary destiny of her unborn son?
2. What does this passage teach us about God's sovereignty and His ability to work through the lives of ordinary people?
3. In what ways do you see God's eternal plan at work in your own life?

Read Luke 1:34-38

Mary seeks clarity on the miraculous conception, and the angel reaffirms the divine intervention. She accepts her role in God's plan with humility and unwavering faith.

1. How do you interpret Mary's response to the angel's revelation? What does it teach us about obedience and faith?
2. In what ways can we emulate Mary's attitude of surrender and obedience in our own lives?
3. How can we trust in God's plan even when it seems beyond our understanding or expectations?

Youth Group Game: Faithful Obedience Challenge

Give the group various scenarios that require quick decisions and faithful obedience. For example, have them navigate a maze blindfolded using only verbal instructions from a teammate, simulating the need to trust and obey without fully understanding the situation.

SESSION 6

This lesson focuses on Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth, and how all of the figures in the story recognized and honored the hand of God in their lives. John leapt up in utero, Elizabeth praised Mary's faith, and Mary sang to the Lord. As these children of God glorified Him, so we can worship the Lord in a variety of ways, with our love, time, and talents.

1. Who would you go to if you had wonderful news to share?
2. Who would you want to talk to if you needed advice or help?

Remind students that Elizabeth was going to give birth to John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for Jesus. Both Elizabeth and the baby inside of her recognized that something amazing was happening with Mary. John, not yet born, leaped for joy when Mary approached! This child knew whose presence He was in. Elizabeth felt it and was filled with the Holy Spirit. This means God told her what was happening. She knew who Mary was carrying, and she considered it an honor to be in her presence. Elizabeth also noted how wonderful it was that Mary believed and had been granted the ability to bear Jesus.

1. What do you do when you get really great news?
2. How do you act if you're very joyful and excited about something special?
3. How do we give praise to God for wonderful things?

Explain that John was rejoicing inside of Elizabeth, praising God in an infant's way. Elizabeth glorified God and knew what He had done. There are a lot of wonderful ways

that we can celebrate God's hand and power in our lives. In this story, Mary responded with a joyful song. She rejoiced in what God had done.

Mary sings of the mighty works of God, and of his hand in her life and throughout the world. When wonderful things happen, we can celebrate and rejoice. We might sing or make music, we might jump and dance, we might do art, or just tell others that we love Jesus! There are so many ways we glorify God, and he welcomes and loves our genuine praise. No matter who we are or what we do, we can tell others of His love, and praise Him for who He is and what He does for us.
How can we praise God every day? What do we have to be joyful and excited about?

Activity - Meditation

Have the youth get in a comfortable position, put on some soft music, and ask them to reflect on the words of the Magnificat with these questions:

1. What magnifies the Lord's presence your life?
2. What tempts you to be proud, mighty, or stronger than others?
3. How can you serve others on behalf of God?

SESSION 7

We discover a song of praise and prophecy from Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. This passage not only sheds light on the birth of John but also sets the stage for the arrival of Jesus Christ.

Teenagers are on a quest for identity, purpose, and meaning. This passage provides insight into how God fulfills His promises and brings hope even in the midst of uncertainty. Understanding the significance of God's plan and recognizing our role in it can strengthen our faith and guide us through these formative years.

Read Luke 1:68-75

This is known as Zechariah's Song of Praise. Zechariah praises God for remembering his covenant with Abraham. He highlights the fulfillment of God's promise through the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah will rescue God's people, offering salvation and forgiveness of sins.

1. How does Zechariah's praise reflect the fulfillment of God's promises?
2. In what ways can the coming of Jesus be seen as a rescue mission for humanity?

Read Luke 1:76-79

John is described as the prophet preparing the way for the Lord. His role is to give knowledge of salvation and forgiveness through Jesus. The sunrise from on high will visit us, bringing light to those in darkness.

What do you think it means for John to "give knowledge of salvation"?
How can we bring the light of Jesus into the lives of those around us?

Activity: Faithful Pictionary

Engage in a game of Pictionary with a twist. Create a list of [Bible](#) verses or themes related to faith, salvation, and God's promises. Divide into teams and take turns drawing

and guessing. Each correct guess should lead to a brief discussion on the significance of the verse or theme.

Engage in a game of Pictionary with a twist. Create a list of Bible verses or themes related to faith, salvation, and God's promises. Divide into teams and take turns drawing and guessing. Each correct guess should lead to a brief discussion on the significance of the verse or theme.

Read Luke 1:79 (Focus on "guiding our feet into the way of peace")

The "way of peace" is a path guided by God, leading us toward reconciliation and harmony. As teenagers, embracing God's guidance brings peace amid life's chaos. Walking in the way of peace involves forgiveness, humility, and love.

1. How can following the "way of peace" impact our relationships with others?
2. In what areas of your life do you need God's guidance for peace?