

Luke 1.26–38

Preparation

Amington

Sunday 6 December 2020

Preparation

What's the biggest thing you've ever prepared for? I remember – just about – what it was like preparing for my GCSEs. At the time it felt like a military operation! I had 28 papers in 12 subjects and so, being me, had a massive colour-coded plan for revising to make sure I covered all the things I needed to at the right time to be ready for my exams over the summer.

That was nothing of course to preparing for our wedding. But to be fair I didn't have much to do with that because Jess and her mum planned most of it! There are venues to find, invitations to design and make and send, the dreaded guest list, the even more dreaded seating plan, accommodation, food, cars, flowers, where to go for the honeymoon, the photographer, the *videographer* these days, gifts for the bridesmaids – and checking the weather forecast daily, from about six months before the big day...

1 – He announces

God prepares by announcing things in advance. Time and again in the Bible God speaks to his people, telling them what he's going to before he does it – usually through prophets or angels.

We could argue that angels are like buses – for 400 years God had been silent: no prophets since Malachi, no angelic messengers – and now here we have Gabriel visiting three times in one year! First Gabriel visits Zechariah, then Mary, then Joseph.

It's like a big neon sign: something *really* important is happening.

And it's one of the ways God describes himself: unlike idols, he (a) knows the future, (b) speaks to his people, (c) most important has the power to *do* what he says. As Gabriel tells Mary, **'no word from God will ever fail'** (37). Eugene Peterson puts it like this:

The Bible begins with the announcement 'In the beginning God created'—not 'sat majestic in heaven,' not 'was filled with beauty and love.' He created. He *did* something.

Eugene Peterson, A Long Obedience in the Same Direction, 102.

God spoke, and God did – that is who God is and how he rolls. He isn't passive, he is active and busy and powerful.

What does he announce?

God prepares by announcing – so let's take a few minutes to see *what* he announces here.

First: God announces Mary is going to have a baby.

Now Mary, being a woman and therefore sensible, wants to know how this is going to happen. She is *betroted* to Joseph – but not married to him. Betrothal was more than being engaged, but less than being married. All the documents were signed, the bride price was paid, they were called 'wife' and 'husband': that was being 'betroted'. Then a year later there would be a marriage ceremony and they would become – and live together as – a married couple.

Therefore it was not possible for Mary to have a baby yet – unless she were naughty. Which is probably why couples waited a year before finalising the marriage!

But this baby would be different. The word **overshadow** might sound a bit odd (35) – it's one of those things where the people who wrote the Bible tried to find the right word, only there isn't one because they were trying to describe God. The word is used of God's presence filling the tent of meeting (Exodus 40.34-35), and his presence protecting his people (Psalm 91.4, 140.7).

It's a special word, because **second: God announces this will be no ordinary baby.**

When my sister and brother-in-law announced that they were going to have their second child – which turned out to be my nephew Joseph – they did so like this...

Show picture of them standing by the wall of their house

What they did *not* do was go around saying things like, 'We are going to have a son and he is going to be a great king, he will reign over all God's people and his kingdom will last forever.'

Of course, they aren't part of the royal family – but then neither was Mary. And Joseph was as much a descendant of King David as Danny Dyer is a descendant of Edward III – he is, but so are lots of people! He's a long way from being heir to the throne.

Yet this is how the angel announced Jesus' birth.

There are strong echoes of God's promises to King David 1,000 years before. In fact it's basically the same promise, but with one big difference: God promised David his descendants would always reign... here God promises that *this baby* will always reign. This king won't have children and grand-children on the throne; *he* will reign forever and ever and ever.

And that's not all – Gabriel says, **'The *holy one* to be born will be called the Son of God'** (35). Hear these Scriptures... 1 Samuel 2.2: **'There is no one holy like the Lord.** Psalm 71.22: **I will sing praise to you with the lyre, Holy One of Israel.** Isaiah 43.3: **For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel.**

This baby is like *no other* baby, before or since. Somehow he is Mary's son and God's son, somehow he is a man *and God himself*, **the Holy One of Israel.** No wonder God waited 400 years for this announcement! It was well worth waiting for.

What's the *longest* you've ever waited for something? I think for me it was the gap between being ordained deacon and being ordained priest – normally it's one year, but because of what was going on in my life it ended up being *six* years. That was quite the wait. And I'm definitely not the world's most patient person.

Zechariah and Elizabeth – Mary's relative – had waited *years* for a son. They had given up – which is why Zechariah didn't believe it when Gabriel told him. In the same way, many of God's people had given up hope in the 400 years since God had last spoken, through the prophet Malachi. And yet... it was worth the wait: here was God's very own Son, the Holy One of Israel, to be born to a peasant girl named Mary.

2 – He chooses

And that's the second thing God does to prepare. First, he announces, and second he chooses.

Whenever anyone asks me where I live and work, I always have to say 'Amington, Tamworth'. And sometimes I even have to add 'Staffordshire' – sometimes even 'North of Birmingham'!

Nazareth was a place like that. Ordinary, small, unknown – that's why Luke has to say **Nazareth, a town in Galilee** (26).

Mary and Joseph were basically ordinary people, like you and me. They lived in a town no-one had heard of, with normal jobs. Mary was probably around 14 years old, maybe a bit younger, maybe a bit older, because that's the age girls were married then.

Now, if God were going to do something *this* special today, whom do you think he would choose? Would you be surprised if he chose someone from Amington?

Friends, God doesn't care about where you live or what you do. He cares about your heart. He chose Mary – not because she was famous or powerful, but because of her heart. Listen to the way she responds to God's word through Gabriel: **'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered, 'May your word to me be fulfilled'** (38).

That's what God wants from us. He doesn't want an impressive appearance, power, or prestige – he wants something far more important: a humble, obedient, and willing heart. Mary didn't demand a sign or argue or complain – despite the huge personal cost to come: the scandal, the potential for Joseph to divorce her.

She simply trusted God, and was willing to serve. And that is what God asks of us, too.

The coming days are not going to be easy. Christmas is going to be very different for many of us – but let's not forget the sad truth that for many others *it will be no different*, because this is what Christmas is like for them *every year*.

There will be all sorts of things to do and buy to get ready for however you are going to celebrate Christmas this year. But perhaps as we prepare in those practical ways, we might also prepare for Christmas by remembering Mary's example.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to start 2021 with hearts a little more humble, a little more obedient, and a little more willing to serve God?