

# The Unexpected Visitor

## Advent 2021 (28th November - 25th December)



### HISTORY HAS MEANING

During the period of Advent we're going to follow the unfolding story of the preparation for the birth of Jesus as told by Luke the physician. At the outset of his gospel he makes it plain that the story he will tell is not fictitious but has been verified by eye witnesses. He opens his account of the life of Jesus by introducing us to two contrasting characters: Zechariah the elderly priest and Mary a young teenager preparing for her wedding day in the near future. Both of these characters have an encounter with a visitor, you might say from another dimension, a visit that alters their lives and indeed the whole course of history. Luke introduces us to a narrative that brings Heaven and Earth together. A narrative in which God uses the most unexpected of people to become his agents of change in the world.

Over the next few weeks of Advent we're going to take time to study Luke's text a little closer and see what unexpected insights we will uncover. Moving from conversations of disbelief to belief we will uncover the Jerusalem Praise Sessions and finally we'll discover extracts from Mary's diaries, recalling insights that will shed light on the magic of Christmas that goes beyond mythical imaginings of fairies and Santa Claus. Insights that open us up to a spiritual reality inviting us to literally consider the consequences of Heaven touching Earth. Insights that create mystery and faith introducing us to the God with whom nothing is impossible. Such realities of faith far outstretch our minds beyond the predictable commercialisation of a white Christmas; to consider the enormity of what it truly means to say, "Emmanuel" – God is with us.

It is our hope that as you use the material this Advent that you will be drawn into the enormity of what Christmas continually points to. A mark in time, a BC and an AD, when everything changed and history took on its real meaning and significance. Luke seeks to direct our thinking this way by rooting all he shares in a time and location verified by eye witnesses. Today we who believe are invited to join that great company of believers who are open to the fresh reality that God is moving among us through the power and presence of his Holy Spirit.

*Each week of the four week theme runs Sunday-Saturday and has its own subtheme, which contains daily Bible readings and prompts for thought.*

# Conversations of disbelief with an unexpected visitor (28 November, first week of Advent)

History has meaning! Take time to explore in detail the feeling and expectations that meeting the unexpected visitor had on the life of Zechariah.

1. Luke 1: 1-4
  1. **...that you may know.** Luke is seeking to place the story of Jesus and his birth and the preparation for it within history. The story he is about to reveal is written that the reader might feel certain about the truth. This is the season...“that we may know”.
2. Luke 1: 5-7
  2. **Living through disappointment.** There is a lot of info packed into these short verses. Zachariah is aware of the God who acts in history. He is living under an occupying army. God seems silent when it comes to his prayers. This is a story that still resonates around the world today. Perhaps we all live with various levels of disappointment.
3. Luke 1: 8-10
  3. **A chance in a lifetime.** The old priest stands before God and the people doing his duty. When duty turns into sheer delight. A lesson to be learned about faithfulness and humility and God’s compassion and the prayers of the people assembled.
4. Luke 1: 11-13
  4. **I believe in angels.** In these verses we move from disappointment to fear and disbelief. When we encounter the spiritual realm too often we find ourselves full of fear and disbelief. But the spiritual realm speaks to the fear — don’t be afraid and then delivers the most unexpected of messages: “Your prayers have been heard.” Is this a message many of us needs to hear today? God knows what you’re thinking when you come to worship. God knows the hurts you carry and the burdens you bear. He is not unaware of your needs, your longings, and your dreams.
5. Luke 1: 14-17
  5. **Your son will turn fathers hearts.** Zechariah is overwhelmed his son will be the one who prepares the way for someone even greater: Jesus. Can we apply this to our lives? Do we have the insight to see what God might have prepared for the children he gives us? Who are the children we have been called to care for and nurture, to prepare the way for Christ’s coming?
6. Luke 1: 18
  6. **How can we be sure ... that we may know?** Old age can bring its doubt. Will I ever see what God has promised? When we’re confronted with an angel and the desires of our hearts promised, still we ask for evidence — how can I be sure?
7. Luke 1: 19
  7. **My name is Gabriel.** There is something authoritative about this verse. “My name is Gabriel and I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you,” Whaw! What an answer. No wonder Zechariah was struck silent. Will it take an angel to stand before you? Before you will believe that God has heard your prayer, before you believe that you are an important player in the jigsaw of life? Whatever you do remember the importance of the name John.

# Conversations of belief with an unexpected visitor (5 December, second week of Advent)

Six months later, another unexpected visit. Explore in detail the feeling and expectations that meeting the unexpected visitor had on the life of Mary.

## 1. Luke 1: 26-27

## 2. Luke 1: 28

## 3. Luke 1: 29-33

## 4. Luke 1: 34-37

## 5. Luke 1: 38

## 6. Luke 1: 39-41

## 7. Luke 1: 42-45

1. **Seven facts ... You need to know.** Six months later...The angel Gabriel...In Nazareth...A girl engaged to be married...Man called Joseph ...descended from King David...the girl called Mary... Dr Luke wants you to know the story continued in time. The angel outwith time has a name and identity, the girl was engaged not married, Joseph was of royal blood, and Mary was a name to remember. In other words this story is not to be seen as a myth like that of the Greek gods this is a story rooted in time and he checked the facts. Time and history and how we respond to time will shape our lives. What are the seven facts that might shape your life?
2. **The angel's greeting.** What an amazing greeting Mary received from the Angel. God had chosen a very special human being to carry out a special task. Peterson in *The Message* translates this: "Good morning! You're beautiful with God's beauty". Who do we need to see today with Angel eyes that helps us see God's beauty? To whom do we need to become an Angel like person speaking words of encouragement and inspiration?
3. **God's surprise.** Gabriel delivers a surprising message to Mary. This is a big message to give to a young girl living in a small town. Today we are asked to share the same message but 2,000 years on we need to let God's surprise speak to a new generation. We have become the messengers of hope pointing to a new liberation.
4. **Mary's question — How can this be?** Mary's question at first seems no different from Zechariah's . The difference is that Zechariah was wanting proof to be sure about the truth of the Angel's statement. Mary was simply asking how it might come about because she was a virgin. There are times in our lives when we are asked to do things that seem impossible. The angel reminded Mary that with God all things are possible. God can make the way through the most difficult situations. And he can bring about his purposes when we allow the Holy Spirit to overshadow us and bring to birth new and exciting aspects of our spiritual life. In this section of the story we learn that God became one of us in Jesus.
5. **Mary's response.** There is something powerful in Mary's reply. Mary identifies herself confidently to Gabriel: *I'm the Lord's servant. I'm willing to be available.* What a great prayer for each of us to pray.
6. **Mary goes visiting.** Can you reflect on that meeting and what it must have been like to encounter Mary who was overflowing with the love of God?
7. **Elizabeth blesses Mary.** Elizabeth, grasps a deep spiritual principle. When we believe God's promises we become blessed. By trusting and believing God we too can end up blessing others.

# The Zach and Mary Praise Sessions (12 December, third week of Advent)

Take time to explore two songs from two songwriters: Zechariah and Mary, writing about their experience of the God who breaks into history and rescues the poor and the vulnerable. Perhaps continue to reflect on the significance of songs in our lives. These are Christmas songs with a difference...

- 1. Luke 1: 46-49**
  - 1. I can't believe he blessed me.** We shouldn't be surprised that Mary writes a song. You might say she is connecting with God in a big way. The Magnificat gives us an insight into the joy Mary is experiencing. The mighty one has done great things for me. Perhaps we need to take time to recount what God has done in our lives.
- 2. Luke 1: 50**
- 3. Luke 1: 51-52**
  - 2. God's mercy never fails.** Perhaps we need to think more about the faith legacy we pass on to the next generation and also what we have received from past generations. God's goodness is worth remembering and sharing with others.
- 4. Luke 1: 53-54**
- 5. Luke 1: 67-68**
  - 3. He's started a revolution.** For Mary to think and reflect this way shows that she had a political conscience. She had a grasp of what theologians call 'Salvation History'. In other words she believes God is at work in the politics of the world. Where do we see God at work in politicians? What are the dangers in church aligning with politics?
- 6. Luke 1: 69-76**
  - 4. God is on the side of the poor.** This is the kind of challenging thinking that makes Mary God's woman, given the task to nurture the Messiah. This is the kind of thinking that is illustrated in the Jesus Manifesto published in Luke 4: 18-19. This is also the Church's manifesto.
- 7. Luke 1: 77-80**
  - 5. God has rescued us.** If Mary can be filled with the Holy Spirit composing a song of deliverance, so now Luke puts words of praise into the mouth of Zechariah. Zechariah, in the midst of a Roman occupation, believes that God will rescue his people again and his son John will prepare the way. John will be a prophet not a king.
  - 6. He's fulfilled his promises.** Zechariah sees God's hand in Salvation History. John is coming to shine a new light on the meaning of salvation. It is not simply being physically saved from our enemies. He is coming to prepare people for the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins. Zechariah's song is revealing God's redemption plan.
  - 7. He's preparing the way.** John was the one coming to prepare the people's hearts to turn to God. To point to the one who was coming to redeem humanity for all time. John's life and ministry reminds us that we who follow Jesus today are called to make disciples just like John did.

# The unexpected visitors turn up again — Extracts from Mary's Diaries (19 December, fourth week of Advent)

Explore further the story of Christmas from the perspective of Mary keeping a diary of all the events that occurred leading up to the birth of Jesus.

1. Luke 2: 1-5
  2. Luke 2: 6-7
  3. Luke 2: 8-9
  4. Luke 2: 10-12
  5. Luke 2: 13-14
  6. Luke 2: 15-18  
(Christmas Eve)
  7. Luke 2: 19-20  
(Christmas Day)
1. **A stressful journey.** Again so much info seeking to root this story in a historical time and space. All the information in the text this week must have come straight from Mary. A time of great transition and change. What a stressful journey it must have been. Today many people find themselves having to register to secure their identity and their future. Even though an Angel had visited them, Joseph and Mary still had to attend to the realities of life. Tax returns had to be made. Life with Jesus doesn't remove us from stress.
  2. **"I had my baby in a stable."** I can hear Mary recalling to Luke the fact that she would never forget the night Jesus was born. Bethlehem was overcrowded everyone was registering. She and Joseph had nowhere to stay, all the inns were full. Finally she had to camp out and give birth to the baby in the stable behind an inn. And I can hear her say, "And you know I laid him in a manger." Learning to make the most of what you have is a powerful lesson. Mary's manger solution will never be forgotten. What's your manger solution?
  3. **Angels visiting had the nightshift scared stiff.** And where did the story of the shepherds and the angels come from? Mary again. The shepherds related to Mary and everyone they met what had happened. They met angels, they experienced the glory of God. They said they were terrified. Perhaps we should never underestimate our capacity to experience the eternal. And be afraid.
  4. **Shepherds overwhelmed at what they hear.** The gospel is a story of great hope. It is truly joy filled news. God has come to redeem our lives and our world. It is a truly amazing story to hear and then believe.
  5. **The greatest praise show on earth.** Take a moment and reflect on what it must be like to encounter the joy of heaven here on earth. God's favour rests on humanity. Christmas is no fairytale. It is the Hope of the world in the darkness. The light of the soul in the darkest night. It points to our joy now and in the future.
  6. **Belonging to the truth.** The Shepherds believed and went to Bethlehem. They didn't grasp the immensity of it all because none of us can. But we all have our Bethlehems to visit. They saw and believed long before they had understanding.
  7. **Mary's treasure.** Here is the clue: Mary remembered all these things. She pondered them in her heart. She knew the truth of the saying of the Simeon: "A sword will pierce your soul too". What are your hidden promises and spiritual treasures that you should be reflecting upon?