

The God Who Keeps His Promises

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[0 : 00] Okay, well thanks Ben. Great to see you this morning folks. Wonderful to welcome some new people as well. It is so lovely to have you. Why don't you turn back to that passage in Luke chapter 1.

And here's what we're going to be doing over the next couple of weeks as we build up to Christmas as a church family. Is we're going to be thinking about some of the songs that we find in the Bible at the very first Christmas.

Because songs are really so much part of the reason why we love this time of year. You know I'll admit to having a little blast in the office this week when no one was around to mock of Last Christmas by Wham.

Consistently voted the number one Christmas song in our culture. And I'll take you on if you want to argue with that. But we love songs at this time of year, don't we? We love songs.

But I love this song in particular. It's got this line, you know the chorus. Last Christmas I gave you my heart, but the very next day you gave it away. This year, to save me from tears, I'll give it to someone special.

[1 : 01] And what's funny when you think about the lyrics to that song is apart from that one line at the beginning, it's got really very little to do with Christmas. The reason George Michael wrote it was because there was a person who came into his life at that time of year who broke their promises to him.

And we can kind of identify with what he's talking about. I mean, our lives are full, aren't they, of people over-promising yet under-delivering.

You know, the politician who promised you the world, got your vote and then didn't deliver on the thing that they said they were going to do. The car mechanic who promised you a price only for it to rise and rise with each phone call that they made to you.

That friend who arranged to meet you for a coffee but who cancelled at the very last minute. I wonder for how many of us here today, the most painful bits of this past year as we look back, were based upon the fact that people broke their words.

Or maybe the flip side of it, maybe it's the guilt and the shame that you feel this morning because we were that person. And I think that's why this message that resounds from this song today, the first one we're going to be thinking about, is such good news for all of us.

[2 : 19] Because let me take you from a man singing a Christmas song about a person who broke their promises to a young woman singing a Christmas song about the God who keeps his.

And here's what struck me afresh about this passage, maybe devotionally this week. There's an awful lot of joy in this passage. And my question I was asking myself this week is, where does that joy come from?

And here's why that's maybe important. I'd imagine I'd take an educated guess that for the vast majority of us here, the thought of this time of year actually brings more dread than it does excitement.

You know, for us speaking personally as a family, it was this time last year and the week before Christmas where my uncle suddenly died. Really suddenly, no one saw it coming. And so for every Christmas from here on in, for us as a family, this is a really bittersweet time of year.

And I know for so many of us here today that something like that is the case. It's not all tinsel and joy. But there's an awful lot of joy in this passage.

[3 : 32] Gabriel announces, okay, if you saw it, the amount of exclamation marks that come after what Gabriel says in this passage. Elizabeth, she cries aloud when she speaks there at verse 41.

John the Baptist in the womb. He leaps for joy. Mary in her song. She magnifies the Lord. Her spirit rejoices. And where their joy comes from, and I think this is what I found so powerful this week. It comes from not the circumstances of their lives. Because as we're going to see in a minute, it's really boring. It's not the circumstances of their lives.

What causes them to have joy is what God is doing in this moment. It's their eyes focus on the baby in the manger.

This baby who will come. And it's so important, isn't it, that joy is different from good times and good things. Now, obviously, those good things and those good times come from the hand of a really good and generous God.

[4 : 37] But don't mistake them for joy. Because these things in our lives, they will come and they will go. They will fluctuate. They will dip in and out. Whereas joy, when it's something that's based on something that's not part of us, something that's unshakable, something that's untouchable, when our world around us crumbles, joy still stays because we know who this God is.

It's based on something steadfast. And so what I devotionally loved rehearsing and learning again this week is that the common source of their joy is Jesus.

And so here is this first century doctor historian called Luke, who has most likely been employed by this man called Theophilus to thoroughly investigate this man called Jesus.

That's what Luke's gospel is. I love that you get that right at the start. Because into our world of fake news, into our world of fact checking, here is something that Luke is saying that we can stake our lives upon.

Something that's transformed the lives of countless people across the world and down the ages. That thing is God's reliable and trustworthy words.

[5 : 58] And so before we get to inside Mary's song, we've got to understand what's going on outside Mary's song. And you read it in Luke's gospel, and it's almost as if Luke is going out of his way to show us that every character, every place, everything in this original Christmas story should surprise us.

Right, follow with me. We've got Elizabeth and Zechariah. Not your young and trendy family, 2.4 children, driving the Vauxhall Sevilla, living the suburban dream, the kind of family you'd expect to see on an advert for a Jet 2 holiday.

That's not these guys. And think about what's going on in their lives. They're a couple with pain in their past. They're a couple probably with shame in their present, because they're old and they've yet to have a child.

That's a surprise, that God would use these kind of people. Think about Mary. She's not the aspiring young professional living up in the penthouse in the big city, is she?

She is the teenage village girl with not a lot going on in her life, except the one thing that is going on in her life, is that she's in love with the village carpenter.

[7 : 21] What we need to understand about Mary and Joseph is this is not Posh and Becks. Hello Magazine aren't phoning up this couple, asking for exclusive rights to their wedding photos.

As far as the world is concerned, there is nothing to see here. And the cherry on the very unimpressive looking cake is the fact that she is from Nazareth.

And people in the Bible make jokes about people from Nazareth. Mary's this kind of country bumpkin. Right? I always remember it in the central belt when I was growing up.

People used to joke about people from the highlands. Right? They called them tchuchters, didn't they? That's the kind of thing that's going on here when people speak about Nazareth.

What good could come from Nazareth? That's a surprise. And that's why, dear friend, I want you to hear what this is saying to us today.

[8 : 20] If you are here and you're hurting, if you're here and you're worried, if you're here and you're burdened, if you're here and your life is looking bleak, then know that you are in very good company because this is the very original Christmas cast.

And it's one of the reasons that I became a Christian is that I fell in love with Jesus and I loved the realism of the Bible.

I remember watching the one show a few years ago. Robbie Williams was on it. And they're asking him about how he dealt with the COVID years. Remember those times. Right?

And what did he say? He said something like his approach to the COVID years is now that we're through them, he said, I'm just going to pretend that that season of life didn't happen. It didn't

happen. And I thought to myself, it was only that simple, Robbie.

You could just write it off and say it didn't happen. I love that the Bible is real and raw. And it presents us with a God who didn't just look on from a distance. It presents us with a God in the flesh, in the person of Jesus, who entered our lowliness, who entered our brokenness, who became weak, who became vulnerable, who came down into our world of pain and brokenness and questions.

[9 : 47] And this is the kind of God that we meet in Luke's gospel. So verse 26 onwards, do you see, if you've got it there, we'll get into the decks, that Mary is pregnant.

Now you see it on the screen there that Luke emphasizes in the text that this pregnancy is the Holy Spirit's doing.

verse 27, we get it there twice. We get the words virgin. Verse 34, we get it again, virgin. Luke's trying to communicate to us something.

And let me just say, maybe at that point, I've lost you. That the virgin birth is up there with Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, and the guy in that red suit and sleigh who's popular at this time of year. And I think it's right that we ask ourselves, and we think long and hard, about the plausibility of the Bible. Because if you can't trust this, then can I suggest that we're all wasting our time here this morning?

[11 : 01] Let me put it to you, if you're thinking about it today, that if there is an all-powerful God who created the world out of nothing, then is this really all that hard for him to do?

Well, maybe you say that's exactly it. I don't believe that there's a God who created the world. And I don't believe in things like miracles. Well, let me ask you again lovingly to think about the fact that you probably believe in more miraculous stuff than you think you do.

Take the creation of the world, for example. This was Stephen Hawking. He says, because there is a law like gravity, the universe can and will create itself out of nothing. And while there are huge elements of truth there, don't hear me wrong, it still doesn't explain why there's something rather than nothing.

I remember sitting in the biology classes at school, listening to my teacher explain to us the how, the how of how the world was created, and really finding her argument intellectually unsatisfying. And so with no answer to the why, can I suggest that there's truth in the slightly mischievous yet thought-provoking words of Glenn Scrivener, who said, Christians believe in the virgin birth of Jesus.

[12 : 26] Materialists believe in the virgin birth of the universe. Choose your miracle. Just think on it for a minute. Now, make no mistake that Christianity is an evidence-based faith.

Hear me loud and clear on that. In fact, I was hearing the story of somebody this week who said the first time that they read the Bible, the Gospels, the thing that struck them most was the fact that the Gospels came with a postcode.

In other words, this is based on geography, history, people's names. That's what you'll see there.

Make no mistake that this is an evidence-based faith, but make no mistake as well that straight from the off-go, from the get-go, we're dealing with the supernatural.

But that the virgin birth happened is one thing. Why it happened is quite another. It's telling us that because, it's telling us that the answer to mankind's sin problem, and history is a long testimony to this, the answer was never and is never going to come from the human gene pool.

The Savior, dear friends, that you and I need, needs to come from out with us, so as not to be stained with our sin.

[13 : 42] And they need to be one of us in order to stand in our place as our representative. And so the virgin birth, far from being a take-it-or-leave-it part of Christianity, is a lot more like a game of Jenga.

You pull out the block, and the whole thing comes crashing down. Here is Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man.

Here is Emmanuel. And really the clues is wrapped up with his name. Verse 31, the angel says, Gabriel says, you shall call him Jesus.

I just love the fact that God picked the name. Do you know how that tells you? It tells you that what's going on here, there's a purpose and there's a plan behind it.

And his name means, and names in the Bible always mean something. His name means God saves. And it's not a boat from the blue.

[14 : 45] And Mary gets this. Little Mary, she gets this. We don't deify Mary, hear me loud and clear, but neither do we underestimate her.

Mary's a legend. Love hanging out with her this week. She is brave. She is a person of faith. She is the mother of Jesus. And we should love Mary here as we step inside her song.

She understands what's going on in this moment. She gets that this is God making good on the promise, the one that he made to his people centuries before.

Verse 55, see the name that's there. God made a promise to who in the text? To Abraham. Abraham. So this is God.

He's going to act, Mary understands, to bless the nations of the world. And that's what makes Mary burst into song. And as we cast an eye over the lyrics of her song, beginning at verse 46, the question that we need to ask ourselves is not, do we have her life?

[15 : 52] Because in so many ways, we don't have her life. The question we need to ask ourselves is, do we share her song? For hope has invaded her heart.

Joy has burst into her soul. Let me just say that's what the God of the Bible does. Constant refrain all the way through the Bible story is that you fill my heart with joy.

When we know who he is, when we consider what he's done for us. Here's what she exclaims, verse 46. And just come with me to the text if you've got it there.

My soul, and feel that, it's an internal thing. My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Notice the threefold repetition of the word my there.

This is not some kind of generic song of praise. This is deeply personal. He's my Savior, says Mary. Let me just quickly pick out two things that make her sing.

[16 : 59] And I love these. Love it. Okay, she's singing. To nick a phrase from the song we've just sang. She's singing that her king's coming with mercy in his eyes. Do you see it?

Verse 50. His mercy. His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation.

That word mercy there, it's the Lord's compassion. It's his love, his kindness, his undeserved favor. And this God shows it to those who do what?

Acknowledge his existence? No. He shows it to those who fear him. And those are two very different things. God's mercy is for those who would reorientate their lives and live them in light of who this God is.

And that mercy extends. It just keeps on going. I love it this time of year, the sales that you see in the shops.

[18 : 07] They always joke about the DFS sale, don't they? That it just never stops. It's that kind of thing. It just keeps on going. From generation to generation, his mercy is there.

And it's a constant refrain in the Bible that makes the souls of God's people sing. And it thrills them that this God does not treat us as our sins deserve.

He is not like the baseball umpire where it's strike one, strike two, strike three, and you're out of here. Because I wouldn't have made it even past this morning. That's not how this God deals with us.

Rather, he is compassionate. He is gracious. He is slow to anger. And he is abounding in steadfast love. And that truth is reaching its pinnacle in the coming of Jesus.

In the words of Jen Wilkin, sorry, I don't have the quote on the screen. Mercy acquires a name. He has helped his servant Israel remembering.

[19 : 14] And it's not as if God forgot. Remembering just means that God acted on his promise. Remembering to be merciful.

God is not like a politician who made a big statement, tried to wiggle out of it before the public caught them and said, Remember you said. Oh, I better do it then. Mary's saying, God, you said you'd do this.

And you're doing it. Friends, the God of the Bible is always so much greater than we think he is. Mary's singing that her king's coming with mercy in his eyes.

And she's singing that her king's coming with might in his arm. Mary's recalling verse 51 that her God always has a track record of getting the victory.

He saved Israel from captivity in Egypt. And he led them out through the Red Sea. And of course, that's the event that defines the very nation of Israel.

[20 : 30] Mary's saying he's at it again. He's doing it again. He's saving us. An impossible situation. Nowhere to go. But somehow, somehow, he's made a way.

And as he does that, he scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. Those who think, I've made it. I've done it.

He brings down the mighty. And he lifts up the humble. Do you not love that? If you're here today, and you're feeling like life's got you, this God lifts up the humble.

And of course, in Mary's world, the superpower of the day is Rome. And it's not just that they're so much bigger and mightier than us.

You think about it in this day before access to travel and all that. You just can't escape the Roman Empire. You just can't get out. Never in a million years could she have conceived that 2,000 years later in this day, people's first thought, my first thought, when I hear the word Caesar, is salad.

[21 : 50] Do you understand the point, though? That this God has a track record of even though it looks impossible to us, we can't fathom how we do it. He always comes through according to his promises.

And yet here we are today and this baby to be born to this peasant girl. And not only are we still talking about him, but apparently 2.7 million new people each year from all corners of the world choose to follow him.

And there's 2.4 billion people alive today who call him Lord. Now, why is that? It's because of what the angel said at verse 33. Of his kingdom, there will be no end.

So Mary's singing because her king's coming with mercy in his eyes. And she's singing that her king's coming with might in his arm.

And both of those things will be so perfectly embodied in the child that Mary will bear. She says, do you see it? And I'd seen this before this week.

[23 : 04] Come and see this. I think it's pretty cool. She says, verse 38. Cue the beetles. Let it be. Do you see that? Let it be. Or some of you have got the older translations of the Bible.

Mary's words there are recorded as, Be it unto me according to thy words. And those words are so extremely close to the words that the boy in her womb would utter years later in Luke 22, as he finds himself on the eve of his death in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Where Jesus, with the fear of the cross pressing in on his soul, would say to God, Not as I will, but your will be done.

You see, Mary made great sacrifices for the baby in her womb. But he would make an infinitely greater sacrifice for her.

Mary willingly accepts in this moment, and don't underestimate this, she willingly accepts the shame that would come on her for not just bearing this child, but associating with this child.

[24 : 21] Right? Nazareth's not a big place. People get wind of this, that she's pregnant and Joseph's not the biological father. You can understand the rumors are going around.

Even watched a comedy sketch with Kevin Bridges recently. He's mocking Mary in the virgin birth. To this day, she still bears the shame of bearing this child. But Jesus would bear the shame for the sin of the world on himself, as he makes the greatest ever sacrifice, surrendering his life on the cross for the sin of his people.

And what so wonderfully here we see in Mary. Her bravery, her walking by faith, her joy in the Lord. That is going to be so wonderfully captured and multiplied in the life of her son-to-be. You look at Jesus on the cross, have a look in his eyes, and see there that we have a king who is all mercy, and we have one who is all might.

And my question to you, just as we bring this to a close, is do you know him? Do you know him? You know, I've worked out the two words that get my children out of bed at the minute.

[25 : 50] If you're a parent, you'll know this. December's a nightmare, trying to get kids out of bed. Summer, can't keep them in bed. Here's the two words that get my children out of bed. Advent, calendar.

And I love Advent, and I always find it interesting that everyone in our society still does this. And let me just say, that's a wonderful evangelistic opportunity for you here today.

Because of society, everybody still does this. That word Advent, Katie said at the start, it means coming. We're counting down the days till Jesus came into the world.

And let's just remember as we close, as we celebrate his first coming, let's remember like Mary here. We are waiting. Not for his first coming, but we're waiting for his second coming.

When we won't see Jesus meek and mild. We will see Jesus as judging and victorious king, coming to make all that is wrong with our world right.

[26 : 59] And you ask yourself, what have we got to go on? And the answer is that we've got exactly the same thing as Mary had to go on. The promises of God calling to join her in being people who live by faith and not by sight.

You see, George Michael wrote a song about a person who broke their promises. Mary says in her song today, come and listen to it. Come and listen to it. Meet the God who gave me joy.

Meet the God who transformed my fortunes. Meet the God who is ever trustworthy for his promises.

And let me tell you about the God who kept his. And don't just admire my song.

Come and join my song. Let's pray, will we? And so, Father, I just ask particularly, Lord, for those here today who, for a host of reasons, that this time of year, Lord, is incredibly hard.

Father, thank you that as we look at this chapter in the Bible, Lord, there is heartbreak all over the original Christmas story. But, Father, thank you that you are the one who invaded.

[28 : 25] You are the one who came. You are the one who breathed hope into the most bleak of situations. And, Lord, I ask that by your Spirit that you would be particularly with those, Lord, who know the bleakness of this original Christmas cast.

Father, we pray that you'd be with us, Lord, as we journey, Lord, more into Advent. Would you just, Lord, stir our hearts again with the joy that comes from knowing Jesus?

And, Father, would you stir our affections as well? Help us, Lord, to be those who are waiting faithfully for his return. So, Lord, be with us for the rest of our time by your Spirit, Lord.

Would you be at work amongst us, we pray, in Jesus' worthy and in his precious name. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[29 : 29] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.