

Followers of the Way

God's true to His Word, so we wait for a purpose

Philip Quenby, 18 December 2022

Luke 2:1-20

Last week we heard Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus. Writing with a Jewish audience in mind, he emphasises how the things he speaks about "took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet [Isaiah]" (Matthew 1:22) concerning the coming of the promised Messiah. Luke adopts a different perspective since his intended readership is Gentile, but he picks up on the prophetic, too, and it's those elements in his telling of the nativity story we're going to explore today.

These are times of great uncertainty and even greater deception. It would be easy to let ourselves become disheartened by all we see and hear. If we're going to continue to stand in such days, then we need to adjust our focus to align with God's plans and purposes, not the world's narrative. Amongst other things, this means understanding where we are on God's prophetic timeline.

Let's start by reminding ourselves of the extraordinary way God weaves together the tapestry of our own lives and of all human history in order to allow us Free Will, yet still ensure His plans and purposes are worked out in full. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah to tell him that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son in their old age – the forerunner of Christ we call John the Baptist – he said "my words will come true *at the proper time*" (Luke 1:20, emphasis added). When we look at God's handiwork in Creation, we can tell He's a God of order and due process, who purposes that "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way." (1 Corinthians 14:40). The result is, there's a set time and set place for things to happen – "a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1), as Solomon said. This may not fit easily with our impatient, go-getting culture and our desire for instant gratification, but that's happens to be how God's set things up. There were four hundred years of silence between the last prophetic word from Malachi and the coming of John the Baptist. There was an even longer wait for the Messiah, arguably first promised when God told the serpent in the Garden of Eden, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." (Genesis 3:15).

Point one: weaving a tapestry isn't the work of a moment. It takes time, and the tapestry of life is such that sometimes we have to wait whilst other threads are woven into place.

The waiting before the birth of the Messiah wasn't because God was distracted or unconcerned about human suffering. It wasn't because He was scrambling to put together a plan after being wrong-footed by events or blindsided by the genius of the Enemy. It wasn't the result of His anger against sinful humanity or a sign He's the megalomaniacal deity atheists like Richard Dawkins try to say He is. It was waiting with a purpose, until all the pieces of the jigsaw were in place – the culmination of what was thought out to the last detail before the foundation of the world. The Gospels show the perfection of God's arrangements for the birth of His Son. There were practical considerations, such having Greek as a universal language to communicate the message of salvation and *Pax Romana* coupled with the Roman road network providing a means by which the Gospel could quickly spread throughout the Roman Empire after the crucifixion. There was a need for extraordinary people to be in position who were willing and able to cooperate with what God wanted to do in and through them – Zechariah, Elizabeth, John the Baptist, Mary and Joseph. And there was an outworking down to the last detail of things foretold centuries beforehand. Here's where Luke's references to the prophetic come in.

Luke says, "Joseph ... went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David." (Luke 2:4). This must have been about the last thing Mary and Joseph would have chosen to do on their own initiative at this point, since she was "expecting a child" (Luke 2:5). The 80-mile trip from Nazareth to Jerusalem would have taken 4 or 5 days even for someone reasonably fit and unencumbered by pregnancy – and the roads could be dangerous, as the parable of the Good Samaritan shows, with its story of a man journeying from Jerusalem to Jericho who "fell into the hands of robbers ... [who] stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead." (Luke 10:30). Yet Joseph had no choice but to go, since "Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken" (Luke 2:1). It seems there was some kind of requirement to return to your birthplace or where your family held property, which is why "everyone went to his own town to register." (Luke 2:3). Most likely, Joseph would have wanted to take Mary even if he wasn't legally compelled to do so: she could have been in a very exposed position had she stayed in Nazareth without him, where wagging tongues would have been the least of her problems. Penalties for extra-marital sex were severe, and were enforced, as evidenced by the woman caught in adultery being brought before Jesus under threat of being stoned to death (John 8:3-5).

God arranged things so Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem, not because He delights in causing us pain and difficulty or in forcing us to jump through hoops just for the sake of it, but because He's true to His Word. The Bible promised the Messiah would be born there: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel." (Micah 5:2). The prophet Isaiah had spoken of the Messiah as "a shoot [which] will come up from the stump of Jesse" (Isaiah 11:1) and of "the Root of Jesse [who] will stand as a banner for the peoples" (Isaiah 11:10) – Jesse being the father of King David, the Messianic forerunner as God's anointed ruler over all Israel who was himself born in Bethlehem. Other prophets confirm this picture and the importance of the Davidic line: "'The days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days

Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.” (Jeremiah 23:5, see also Jeremiah 33:15). God had promised, “I will restore David’s fallen tent” (Amos 9:11) and said, “I will save my flock ... [and] place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them. He will tend them and be their shepherd.” (Ezekiel 34:23-24, see also Ezekiel 37:24-25). All these prophecies and more were fulfilled as “while [Mary and Joseph] were there [in Bethlehem] the time came for the baby to be born.” (Luke 2:6). Later, “Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him’” (Matthew 2:1-2) Through these Gentiles, God brought further confirmation that His Son was worthy of the worship that belongs to the King of kings alone and that Jesus is the One who “will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom” (Isaiah 9:7).

Point two: Jesus was born in Bethlehem as part of God making good on His promise that the Messiah would be a King from the line of David, “Shepherd of Israel” (Psalm 80:1), “that great Shepherd of the sheep” (Hebrews 13:20). We can have confidence in God’s promises!

As well as being King, Christ is our “Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel” (Isaiah 41:14, 43:14, 48:17, 49:7) and “our Saviour, [our] Redeemer” (Isaiah 49:26, 60:16). Luke records how Mary “wrapped [the baby Jesus] in cloths and placed him in a manger” (Luke 2:7), with the angel telling the shepherds, “This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:12). If we take this at face value, we might think the shepherds were simply being given a way of identifying the right child among many babies there might have been in Bethlehem at that time. It’s possible, though with a population some estimate could have been as low as of 300, even if swollen by visitors come for the census, you have to wonder how many babies there’d have been to choose from. Even laying that to one side, there’s almost certainly more to it than first meets the eye. The likelihood is that these were Levitical shepherds, tasked with looking after the lambs destined to be sacrificed at the temple in Jerusalem – shepherds specially chosen and trained for this job. The prophet Amos called himself “one of the shepherds of Tekoa” (Amos 1:1), and since Tekoa lies just a few miles south of Bethlehem, it could be that Amos was one of this same group of Levitical shepherds many centuries earlier.

Levitical shepherds are mentioned in the Mishnah, the collection of Jewish oral traditions that form a commentary on the Torah. Theirs was a skilled job, since lambs selected for temple sacrifice had to be without spot or blemish (Leviticus 22:17-33, see also 1 Peter 1:19), so they needed special treatment and careful observation. Consequently, when the ewe was ready to give birth, these shepherds would take her to a cave or other set-apart place. This birth area was kept scrupulously clean and new-born lambs would be wrapped in swaddling (strips of cloth) as soon as they were born to make sure they’d suffer no injury that would prevent them being suitable for later sacrifice.

So, what Luke tells us about the shepherds points us towards Jesus’ eventual sacrifice on the cross as “Christ, our Passover lamb” (1 Corinthians 5:7), in the same way that gifts brought by the Magi point towards his kingship (gold), priesthood (frankincense) and atoning death (myrrh): see Matthew 2:11). But there are potentially even more layers of

meaning behind Luke's telling of the nativity story, since just to the north of Bethlehem stood *Migdol Eder*, the Watchtower of the Flock. This was a lookout tower on the road from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, at a place where Jacob once pitched his tent (Genesis 35:21). Micah had prophesied, "As for you, O watchtower of the flock, O stronghold of the Daughter of Zion, the former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to the Daughter of Jerusalem." (Micah 4:8). This watchtower was used by shepherds for protection against wild beasts and was where ewes were often brought to give birth to their young. It's another link to the Passover sacrifice, which John the Baptist made explicit when he saw Jesus coming to be baptised, and exclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Point three: every single circumstance of Christ's birth was arranged to tell us exactly who He is and precisely how He draws together all the threads of prophecy and of history. Nothing slips between the cracks. Nothing is overlooked. All will eventually be brought into its rightful place.

If we're not marvelling by now at how God orchestrated all this, there's something wrong with us! And not just that He pulled it all together, but that everything that took place was repeatedly foretold centuries beforehand. No wonder the LORD mocks idolaters, saying, "Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen. Tell us what the former things were, so that we may consider them and know their final outcome. Or declare to us the things to come, tell us what the future holds, so that we may know that you are gods. Do something, whether good or bad, so that we will be dismayed and filled with fear. But you are less than nothing and your works are utterly worthless; he who chooses you is detestable." (Isaiah 41:22-24).

Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them." (Matthew 6:17). The Gospels describe His fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, and also show His progressive fulfilment of the Feasts of the LORD – those feast days which God established for Israel as "my appointed feasts, the appointed feasts of the LORD, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies." (Leviticus 23:2). These Feasts mirror the rhythms and seasonality of Israel's farming year. The **four Autumn feasts** were fulfilled through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross (**Passover**), His perfect life without the leaven of sin (**Unleavened Bread**), His rising to new life as "the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20) (**First-fruits**) and the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (**Weeks**). He'll fulfil the three remaining (**Spring**) **Feasts** at His Second Coming: as the Bride of Christ is raptured at **Trumpets**, the Jews mourn "the one they have pierced" (Zechariah 12:10) on the **Day of Atonement** and the risen Christ comes to dwell (tabernacle) with His people on earth and rule and reign from Jerusalem at **Tabernacles**.

God planned all this from the very beginning of Creation, when He set "lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and ... serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years" (Genesis 1:14).

Point four: since the LORD of Creation is a God of order, this means everything He plans happens in its allotted sequence and in due season. Whether we're rich or

poor, sick or well, esteemed or despised by the world – all will come right in the end, because He’s determined that it will be so.

Meanwhile, we live in the time between the first and second coming of Jesus, and so we experience a paradox: the “now” and “not yet” of His kingdom. The kingdom of heaven is here, yet it’s still to come. We already have the wonderful gift of Christ and all He brings as “Light of the world” (John 8:12) for today and “the bright Morning Star” (Revelation 22:16) of hope for tomorrow – but we’re waiting for this gift to be complete in the new (or renewed) creation where “the leaves of the tree [of life standing either side of the river that flows through the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem] will be for the healing of the nations, [and] there will no longer be any curse” (Revelation 22:2-3).

Sometimes we’re perplexed by what’s going on. We don’t understand what God is doing and why He allows certain things to happen. If that’s where we find ourselves, we might usefully take a leaf out of Mary’s book by reflecting on what we’ve been considering just now, “[treasuring] up all these things and [pondering] them in [our] hearts.” (Luke 2:19). Because if we do that, how can we fail to respond like the shepherds did, “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told” (Luke 2:20)?

The shepherd-prophet Amos described terrible times in Israel, as people “[trampled] on the heads of the poor ... and [denied] justice to the oppressed.” (Amos 2:7) – a description that sounds somewhat too close for comfort in present-day Britain. Since Amos was under the Old Testament dispensation before the Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh at the first Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21), he concluded, “the prudent man keeps quiet in such times, for the times are evil.” (Amos 5:13). By contrast, in the New Testament era Paul turned this sentiment on its head, cautioning the church in Ephesus to “Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.” (Ephesians 5:16). The shepherds who saw the baby Jesus were so full of what they’d experienced that they couldn’t help themselves. They “spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” (Luke 2:18). We have opportunities aplenty to do the same. We’re waiting for “the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour” (Titus 2:13), yet it’s waiting with a purpose. Often what we need to do isn’t what we’d necessarily choose, and it comes at a cost. Sometimes we don’t understand why it must be so. But as the old saying goes, we need to let go and let God.

We can be assured of this: God keeps His promises. He does exactly what He says He’ll do and takes care of the very smallest of details – with nothing out of place, nothing lacking. He’s a God of order, process and seasons. He makes sure everything happens in the right sequence and at its appointed moment. Doing this isn’t the work of an instant. It takes time. Time is one of the greatest gifts. It’s the one commodity we can never get more of. So, let’s all take time in this Christmas season to glorify our Saviour and be witnesses to what we’ve seen and heard. Amen.