

It's the greatest story ever told, from the pen of the best writer the world has ever known

- Better than Milton and Dickens and Elliot
- More memorable and meaningful than Homer or Shakespeare or Tolstoy
- I'm talking about Luke, who alone among the New Testament writers brought us the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, the Road to Emmaus and the Pentecost event, Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus
- and the sweet, simple story of the birth of Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem

Luke was a preservationist

- Writing some forty years after the events took place, he was concerned that the stories were getting mixed up and lost
- Like World War II veterans today, the original eyewitnesses of Jesus' death and resurrection were becoming scarce
- Luke began his Gospel by stating his purpose: "to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us" (*Luke 1:1*)
- His first scene could easily have been the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary, followed by Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem, the birth in the stable, and angels proclaiming Good News to the shepherds
- It's the best-known story in human history

But you know what happens in the media—popular hits are milked to death, reduced to their lowest common denominator

- Hallmark apparently failed to notice that Luke chose to begin, not with Mary and Joseph, but with a small-town couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth, an aging priest and his wife
- Before bringing out the crown jewels of his narrative, Luke made it clear that the witnesses are nearly as important as the event

Two weeks ago I talked about Zechariah's amazing encounter with an angel in the Jerusalem Temple, how he was struck mute until the birth of his son John, after which eloquent praise of God burst from his lips

- Today the focus turns to Elizabeth: her surprising and even scandalous pregnancy, and the part she played in announcing the birth of Jesus
- Look around at some of the nice, older ladies in church today
- You've got to admit it would be quite a sensation if _____ or _____ turned up pregnant next year!
- Everyone in the Judean hill country was watching Elizabeth, wondering what in the world was going on

But who would have paid any attention to Mary?

- Beyond her marriage prospects, a young woman had little status or significance in that culture
- Clearly she was bold, undertaking the trip to Elizabeth's village alone and on foot
- But the effects of her encounter with Gabriel weren't visible yet—people assumed that she'd come to help Elizabeth with the household
- No one realized how profoundly the two women's worlds had been shaken

Mary knew in some deep way the truth of what was happening—otherwise she couldn't have said “yes” to the angel

- Her snap decision to race to Elizabeth's side wasn't for proof, which was already emerging in the transformation of her body
- Mary needed a companion who could appreciate the impact of what she'd agreed to
- It was not so much a desire to make sense of these things—frankly, they defy human understanding
- Mary needed to share the awesome wonder and overwhelming burden she carried

There are moments at the peaks and valleys of human experience when words are not capable of conveying reassurance or comfort

- In the face of the extremes of life and death, we simply aren't able to respond in any helpful way
- Mary approached Elizabeth's house that day with the handprint of God on her belly and the weight of the world on her shoulders
- Time stood still as she knocked on the door, waiting for a response

Here we experience the pinnacle of Luke's genius in presenting the story

- When Mary greeted her, “the child leaped” in Elizabeth’s womb (*Luke 1:41*)
- In that instant, God’s gift to humankind went from being a young woman’s private spiritual experience to an incipient tidal wave, ready to wash over every community on earth
- I’ve never seen this on a Hallmark card, but John in utero was the first witness to the coming of Jesus Christ

Then their tongues were unleashed, and the two women praised God with the most extravagant words

- “Blessed are you among women,” said Elizabeth, “and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”
- “My soul magnifies the Lord,” said Mary, “for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is (God’s) name.”
- There were still no words of explanation—just a celebration of the wonder of God’s presence and action

As an adult, John the Baptizer looked a lot like the Old Testament prophets, who warned the people of the consequences of straying from God’s path

- But from the beginning he was profoundly different—proclaiming the coming of the Messiah even before his birth
- John is the prototype for generations of Christian witnesses, who in both dramatic and ordinary ways have personally spread the Good News
- These angel visitations may seem far beyond the reach of our lives
- But there’s no doubt that we have parts to play in this Christmas pageant

Let’s just take a peek at the way Luke ends the story of Jesus’ life on earth

- In the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, as Jesus is preparing to ascend into heaven, he gives final instructions to the crowd gathered around him

- “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and all Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (*Acts 1:8*)
- As the immediate presence of Jesus faded into memory, the witnesses came to the forefront

In the narrative world of the Gospel, Joseph and Mary are now on their way to Bethlehem, and the baby will be born in just a few days

- The next time we gather here it will be dark outside
- With music and stories and candle-lit prayers we’ll celebrate the awesome wonder of the Son of God coming among us

But let’s pause at the moment when John leaped in his mother’s womb...

- when the primitive power of his witness lit up the hearts of Elizabeth and Mary, starting a chain reaction of Good News that’s still spreading today...
- when every one of us was adopted into God’s family and given a part to play in the story of salvation...
- “For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is (God’s) name.”