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**Sunday 19 December 2021 to Sunday 26 December 2021**

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Sunday 19 December 2021

# A meeting filled with wonder

by Rachael Stelzer

**And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant’ (Luke 1:46–48).**

Read Luke 1:39–45 [46–55]

Mary has been visited by an angel, who has shared that she will be the mother of God’s son. After inquiring how this could be, Mary has humbly accepted the role given to her, with all of the scandal and social shame this carries. But who can she talk to? Who will understand the crazy rollercoaster she is on?

And the angel provided the answer: Mary’s own older relative, Elizabeth, who is in her sixth month of pregnancy and herself in isolation. So Mary visits the hill country of Judea to find some support for this journey.

As Elizabeth opens the door to Mary, the baby in her womb leaps. The angel had promised Zechariah that John the Baptist would be filled with the Holy Spirit, and this prophecy is already borne out before his birth. And Elizabeth, too, is filled with the Spirit, and she begins to loudly proclaim what she cannot yet see – that Mary is pregnant with the Messiah. In contrast to most in their society, who would see this birth as a scandal and a punishment, Elizabeth proclaims Mary blessed.

Can you imagine the two clasping hands, the older woman jumping for joy and shouting her excitement to the teenager in front of her? Can you see Mary, relief flooding from her as the secret she has carried is joyfully prophesied to her by a member of her own family? Do you picture the glimmer of wonder in the eyes of these two women, separated by years – but connected by the miracles occurring in their bodies – and their gratitude for being part of this divine plan?

And Mary’s words are in the form of poetry, a song of joy and praise, in a series of reversals that ring familiar as we remember Jesus’ teaching throughout the Gospels. God has lifted up the lowly but humbled the rich and important. He has filled the hungry with good things but sent the rich away empty. But for Mary, these events are in the past tense. God has already accomplished these things. And she praises God for bringing them about, individually and for the Israelite people.

Like Mary, we look back to God’s power at work, to the reversals that God’s kingdom has ushered in. And like Mary, we look forward to the completion of this work. We look forward to the end of oppression, the lifting up of the lowly, and the restoration of our relationship with God, which came about through Jesus' death and resurrection. This Advent season, may our souls and voices lift with Elizabeth’s and Mary’s as we magnify our great God.

**King Jesus, it is so like you to choose a humble teenager to nurture you as you grew here on earth. We now magnify you as the loving King and Lord of all, and we look forward to your coming again to bring all things to completion. Amen.**

Monday 20 December 2021

# Hannah’s song

by Rachael Stelzer

**There is no-one holy like the Lord; there is no-one besides you; there is no Rock like our God (1 Samuel 2:2).**

Read 1 Samuel 2:1–10

Everyone loves an underdog story. We love to hear about a battler who has received an unexpected prize that sets them up for life or someone who has had the biggest wish in their heart granted.

Yesterday we witnessed two unlikely mothers clasping hands and jumping for joy as God’s Spirit inspired songs and poetry in them to respond to the miracles taking place around and inside them. Today we hear a very similar song of praise, this time from the Old Testament. Hannah was the wife of a righteous man, but the Israelites of her time interpreted her childlessness as a curse or punishment. Hannah literally threw herself onto God’s mercy in the temple with such emotion that the priest Eli mistook her desperation for drunkenness.

And when God graciously granted Hannah’s deepest desire, she sang a new song of praise.

As with Mary, Hannah recognised that God ‘sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honour’ (1 Samuel 2:8).

Hannah recognised God’s agenda in this – human understandings of wealth, prestige and ‘blessing’ do not come close to God’s understanding of true blessing. And although this faithful woman could have no idea of the role her son would play in the history of Israel or the arrival of the Saviour of the world, she prophesied at the end of her song: ‘He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed’ (1 Samuel 2:10).

Thanks be to God, who brings about a plan for the salvation of the world, and in doing so, grants the desire of one woman’s heart.

Hannah recognised the miracle and joyfully offered her son back to God. He became the great prophet Samuel who anointed King David and set the scene for the arrival of the Chosen One, born of the line of David.

May we recognise the miracles in our lives and offer back to God the blessings we have been granted. What song can you sing today?

***Dear God, you know the desires of my heart. I don’t know how my circumstances fit into your bigger plan, but I am so grateful to walk with you. Use me as you will. Amen.***

Tuesday 21 December 2021

# Wisdom’s delight

by Rachael Stelzer

**Then I was constantly at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind (Proverbs 8:30,31).**

Read Proverbs 8:22–31

Wisdom. The very word conjures up images of tweed coats and booklined studies, lined faces and dignified pronouncements. It is an aspirational idea: Do I have wisdom? Have I done the hard yards of learning and experience to consider myself wise? Does acquiring wisdom mean leaving behind childish frivolity and putting away my smiles?

This passage from Proverbs seems to drop a bomb on our traditional ideas about wisdom. And it does it through an ambiguous translation.

Wisdom, personified as female, is contrasted with the brazen woman of chapter 7, who lures people with her smooth talk, whose false promises lead to death. Wisdom introduces herself as being present before and during the creation of the world and used by God in creation.

She then goes on in Proverbs 8:30,31:

Then I was constantly at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.

Verse 30 has been translated in two ways. ‘I was the master craftsman at his side’, and ‘I was like a little child at his side’.

Scholars suggest that either translation is possible, and this adds to the richness of our understanding. It is entirely appropriate to us that Wisdom was the master craftsman at God’s side – the architect of creation. But Wisdom as a small child, rejoicing at God’s world, and delighting in humanity? Can you see the small child giggling at a giraffe or with her eyes open wide at a mountain range?

For this is also God’s joy in us and the wonder of community.

Is it time we rediscover our ability to wonder, particularly this Christmas? Can we learn from children about awe and delight? Can we set aside our pride and remember to rejoice?

***Dear Jesus, Wisdom helped you create the world, as the architect and the small child by your side. Please help me to explore what this means for me this Christmas. I delight in you. Amen.***

Wednesday 22 December 2021

# Listening for the Lord’s voice

by Rachael Stelzer

**The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying: ‘I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness’ (Jeremiah 31:3).**

Read Jeremiah 31:1–6

Today’s Bible passage is one of contrasts. The people of Israel have been defeated by the Babylonians and exiled from the Promised Land. Jeremiah has had many harsh and difficult things to say to the people. But in this passage, God comforts and promises to restore Israel.

God speaks gently and encouragingly through Jeremiah to ‘Virgin Israel’. God promises that they will dance once again with timbrels, that their farmers will again plant vineyards and enjoy their fruit, and most importantly, that they will once again be able to go to Zion, the holy mountain, to meet with God in the temple there.

Perhaps the hardest thing for the people is understanding God’s plan in all this devastation. God reminds them in this passage, ‘I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness’ (Jeremiah 31:3). On the face of it, God seems to have had a funny way of showing this! It is easy to fall into the trap of seeing the God of the Old Testament as vengeful and harsh – a total contrast from our New Testament understanding.

But throughout the history of God’s people, God has always shown his everlasting love – not just for them, but for all people. God’s master plan, the plan of salvation, has been coming to fruition. At times, it has taken disaster and generations of displacement and grief for the people to turn back to the Lord, but God has always been enacting his sovereign plan. And now they are recalling God’s words of everlasting love.

The people waited for their restoration, for their salvation. And we wait for our restoration also. At times, it feels like we will never make it, and the many voices of our world compete for our attention. But we cling to the God who has loved us with an everlasting love, came to be one of us and will come back to restore all things. Thanks be to God!

**Dear God, help me see you in every circumstance, loving me with an everlasting love, drawing me with unfailing kindness. Teach me the joy of waiting on you. Amen.**

Thursday 23 December 2021

# The Lord is with you

by Rachael Stelzer

**‘I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled’ (Luke 1:38).**

Read Luke 1:26–38

I wonder where Mary was and what she was doing when the heavenly messenger appeared. What was occupying her thoughts when God dropped a bomb on her life?

And, in this week that presents us with so many paradoxes, contrasts and surprises, the angel’s first words clang in our ears.

‘Greetings, favoured one. The Lord is with you.’

You know that tone of voice someone uses when they have a massive job or a difficult task, and they are trying to recruit you for it? I wonder if Mary’s ‘uh-oh’ sensor went off when God’s representative started telling her how blessed she was.

Because as Mary discovered the hard way, her blessing would involve scandal, rumour-mongering, an extended stay with her elderly pregnant relative, travelling while pregnant, giving birth away from her home, a midnight flit to escape a megalomaniac ruler and life as a refugee. And all this within the next five years of her life. And that was just the start.

And yet, in stark contrast to Zechariah, who questioned and queried to the extent that he was struck dumb until the birth of his child, Mary just asked one clarifying question and then submitted to God’s will.

She had no understanding of the role she would play in nurturing the Saviour of the world or the grief she would experience later in her life. She just knew that in this out-of-control situation, she could cling to the promise of the angel.

Can we do the same in this out-of-control situation we call life in 2021? Can we trust that the Lord is with us? Can we confidently respond to God’s call by saying, ‘I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled’?

**Dear Jesus, Mary was not wise or learned – just obedient to God’s call. Help me to listen for your call and serve you in obedience. Amen.**

Friday 24 December 2021

# Prince of Peace

by Rachael Stelzer

**For to us a child is born, to us a son is given … And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6).**

Read Isaiah 9:2–7

Isaiah wrote in a time of war. The people of Israel were involved in wars with conquering nations, frequently with dark results for the Chosen People. The aftermath of a loss in war was destruction, exile, slavery, and harsh reparations. The people truly walked in darkness in these times.

And into this narrative, Isaiah introduces a language of victory. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. And they will rejoice “as warriors rejoice when dividing a plunder”. God is hailed as the one who brings the glorious victory.

‘For as in the day of Midian’s defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them’ (Isaiah 9:4).

And then, in the ultimate contrast, Isaiah speaks the joy of the birth of a son. A baby who will carry all authority and every title. Not a magnificent military hero but a child who is the Prince of Peace.

The King who will rule his people with righteousness and justice – the Everlasting Father, the Mighty God – will not rule with power and fear but love and peace. Our God humbled himself, and he became completely vulnerable. He became one of us, and he rules us with love, grace and peace.

**King Jesus, you rule over this world with righteousness and justice. All glory be to your name. Rule over me with your everlasting love. Amen.**

Saturday 25 December 2021

# Nothing will ever be the same

by Rachael Stelzer

**She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them (Luke 2:7).**

Read Luke 2:1–7[8–20]

The people of Israel were marginalised. Oppressed. Conquered. Invaded. Rome had spread its Pax Romana across the known world through military might and acts of war.

At the start of this passage, we hear of Caesar Augustus and the governor Quirinius. We are told of their census, designed to count and tax all conquered lands. Society is quantified and controlled through this act, and there is stability and peace. Of sorts.

But then a tiny baby is born to a teenage Israelite girl who has travelled away from home. A heavenly sound and light show explodes on a hillside, witnessed only by the most marginalised members of society. An angel reports ‘good news of great joy for all the people’, with echoes of the birth announcements of the Caesars themselves, to a bunch of stinky shepherds. And they go to see for themselves and tell everyone they can find.

And nothing will ever be the same.

In this birth, in this arrival, God is with us. The God who has raised the humble but cast down the mighty. This God who has set the Prince of Peace on the throne of victory. This God whose wisdom comes mingled with childlike wonder and delight. This is the God we serve. This is the God who loves us with an everlasting love. Praise and glory be to our Prince of Peace!

**Jesus, our infant king, we adore and thank you for your incredible love. You are God with us. Help us know your love and companionship this Christmas season. And help us to share it with others. Amen.**

Sunday 26 December 2021

# Growing in mind, body, spirit and relationships

by Pastor Nathan Hedt

**And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and all the people (Luke 2:52).**

Read Luke 2:41–52

Unlike modern biographies, we have very little record in the gospels of Jesus’ growing up years. The events between his birth and the beginning of his public ministry in his baptism all fit into less than two chapters (Luke 2 and Matthew 2). But there is this wonderful summary in Luke 2:52, after Jesus’ trip to the temple at 12 years old: ‘And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and all the people.’

This verse talks about the boy Jesus growing in body, mind, spirit and relationships. These are four essential elements that make us human and, to a large extent, comprise the ‘image of God’.

Body: Jesus was a real human being who went through all of the normal things that a young human does as they grow up. He ‘became flesh and dwelt amongst us’ as John 1 says.

Mind: The Son of God had to learn, to grow in wisdom. It’s an astounding thought that God had never experienced being human from the inside before! God’s very being was changed by taking the risk of the incarnation.

Spirit: Jesus grew in favour with God. It’s not that he didn’t have God the Father’s favour from all eternity. But he learned to actively carry out his Father’s will throughout his life.

Relationships: Jesus grew in favour with all the people. We see from the rest of the gospels that he really cared for people; he looked past their social status, illness, sin and weakness, and he loved them fully as he loved himself.

In this coming year, how beautiful would it be if each of us could, like Jesus, ‘grow in wisdom and stature, in favour with God and with all the people’! Could there be a better prayer or New Year’s resolution? If we could care for our bodies, the temples of the Holy Spirit. If we could grow more and more in wisdom, a God-given skill for living in the complexities of everyday life. If we could grow in Spirit in favour with God as we grow deeper in our understanding of his favour for us always through Jesus. If we could grow in relationships in favour with all the people, not just to please people but to introduce them more closely to Jesus.

**Lord Jesus, thank you for the profound reality of your incarnation. This coming year, would you help me grow more fully human? Would you restore me in the image of God, so I may grow in wisdom and stature, in favour with God and with all the people? In your name, I pray. Amen.**