

Three Advent Studies on the Angelic Announcements of Advent

by Armin J. Panning, Richard D. Balge, and John C. Jeske

One: John the Baptist, A Special Child Announced by an Angel

Luke 1:11–17

by Armin J. Panning

In the routine and drudgery of everyday life there are few days that are truly special. People do not even agree what it takes to make a day special, but most would concede that the birth of a child constitutes a true, red-letter day.

Proud parents often share their joy by sending birth announcements to family and friends. It's interesting to note that on occasion God too has sent "birth announcements." They have, however, not been the standard Hallmark card giving name, birthdate, weight and length. They have rather been personal messengers—and often they've been sent not *after* but *before* the child's birth, yes, even before the child's conception. We think of the divine messengers to Abraham regarding Isaac (Genesis 18) and to Manoah regarding Samson (Judges 13).

The whole thrust of the Advent season is to get us ready for the promised birth of God's Son. And to help us in this important task God has sent a personal messenger in the person of John the Baptist. The importance of this forerunner is brought home to us when Luke informs us that the birth of this forerunner himself was announced by a divine messenger. We do well then in the Advent season to turn our attention to:

John The Baptist, A Special Child Announced by an Angel

I. Special to his parents

- A. Luke has provided us with a formal introduction to the prospective parents:
 1. Both of the tribe of Aaron (5)
 2. "upright," "blameless" (6), but
 3. "barren," "well along in years" (7)
- B. The stigma of barrenness had been the object of prayer. The angel however announces that their prayers have been heard.
 1. "will bear a son" (13)
 2. "John" (13); name means "Jehovah is gracious"
 3. "a joy and delight" (14a) Zechariah silent (22), but note Elizabeth's reaction: "Lord...has taken away disgrace" (25)
- C. Elizabeth recognizes what our age needs to remain aware of:
 1. Children not a nuisance, to be "controlled" or aborted
 2. Children are a "heritage from the Lord" and as such special.

Transition: To be sure, John was special, but not only to his parents. He was also

II. Special to the Lord

The angel promises, "He will be great in the sight of the Lord." This greatness evident in various ways:

- A. "filled with the Holy Spirit from birth" (15c). Note dramatic fulfillment when unborn John "leaped in her (Elizabeth's) womb" at Mary's visit (41)
- B. "no wine or fermented drink" (15b). Nazirite vow (Numbers 6) usually taken for limited time; John special; permanently set aside to do Lord's work as forerunner.
- C. "he will go before the Lord" (17)
 1. "In spirit and power of Elijah," as foretold by Malachi 4:5, 6
 2. An effective forerunner, as attested by Jesus ("none greater than John" Luke 7:28)

Transition: John unique; special to the Lord in that he prepared the way for His Son. John did not, however, do that work for the Savior's benefit. He did it rather for sinners who need that Savior. Hence John is above all

III. Special to God's people.

- A. The angel emphasizes the importance of John's work in the host of parallel expressions used to describe his work:
 - 1. "Many...will he bring back to the Lord" (16)
 - 2. "Turn...the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous" (17b)
 - 3. "Make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (17c)
- B. John makes ready "people prepared for the Lord" through the two-fold message of law and gospel: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 3:2).
- C. John still testifies through the Scriptures (our text); hence special also to us. May his message ("birth announcement") prepare us to say, "Redeemer, come! I open wide my heart to Thee."

Two: The Angelic Announcement to Mary

Luke 1:26–28

by Richard D. Balge

The angel's words to Mary remind us of the familiar words in the Nicene Creed: "...who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man." It was the custom in the medieval church that at the phrase, "and was made man," the people bowed the knee. The story was told that the devil once visited a church at Christmas and noticed a worshiper who did not bow the knee. Satan hit the man alongside the head, saying: "What's wrong with you? If he had become one of *us*, *I* would bow the knee."

It's only a story, but it reminds us of the majesty and miracle and condescending mercy of the incarnation.

What Luke records is not just a story. It is a part of God's Word, part of the history of God's salvation. In *The Angelic Announcement to Mary*, we see that:

I. God's Favor is Extended

Brief exposition of vv 26,27. The preacher did not try to establish Jesus' descent from David through Mary on the basis of v 27. The ἐξ οὐκουν Δαυίδ almost certainly modifies Ἰωσήφ and not παρθένου. Let v 32, in its place, speak of Jesus' Davidic ancestry.

The angel's greeting (v 28) is pure gospel. The perfect participle κεχαριτωμένη describes the Virgin as "one to whom the Lord has been and is being gracious."

Mary did not react with immediate joy to this happy message (v 29). She was troubled (aorist) and kept debating with herself (διελογίζετο, imperfect) about the nature of this greeting. "Why an angel? Why to me? What responsibility is God about to give me?" Christmas card angels would not trouble most people, but real angels often have to say: "Do not be afraid" (v 30a).

No need to fear, because God is going to treat her as one of his favorites. There is no reason for it except his gracious good will: εὖρες γὰρ χάριν παρὰ τῷ θεῷ (v 30b). Here we see that she is a recipient of grace, not a source.

Probably the only angel we will meet this side of heaven is the angel of death. He will come and announce that it is time to leave our things behind and go along home. It may be that we will be afraid, not because we have to be but because we are still human, still sinners.

Then we will want to remember the message that Gabriel proclaimed here and which we have heard all our lives: “Do not be afraid.” “The Lord is with you.” “You have found favor with God.” We can know that these things are true because he kept the promise which he made that day to Mary of Nazareth.

II. God’s Son is Promised

The angel has a marvelous announcement: ἴδού (v 31). That Mary will be with child and bear a child is a marvel, because she is still a virgin. What she is to call her Son is even more marvelous. His name means “the Lord is Salvation,” and in view of what follows we see that it is not only a name.

A common Jewish name, Joshua, Yeshua. But a unique child. All the names and concepts of vv 32,33 apply to the Promised One. He will be called “Son of the Highest,” not as an honorary title but because that is what he is. The throne of his father David will be his. God had promised David on oath that he would place one of his descendants on an enduring throne (2Sm 7:12,13,16). Neither Solomon nor any other king of Judah fulfilled that promise. Mary’s child will. He will be the king of Israel. When the house of Jacob has no king then the true Israel, those in whose hearts he graciously reigns, will acknowledge him. He will see to all their needs of body and soul, as a king of Israel should. The eternal destiny of every human being is in his hands: “His kingdom will never end.”

God’s Son is promised. God has kept this promise. This is history: Jesus Christ came to fulfill all righteousness and redeem us. This is current events: “Still he comes within us; still his love would win us.” This is eternity: He 13:8.

III. God’s Power is Demonstrated

Mary does not ask how this can happen. She does not ask for a sign as Zacharias had (1:18). She asks, “How will this be, since I am a virgin (v 34)?” Isaac’s mother, Samson’s mother, Samuel’s mother all had husbands. All those boys whose birth was announced by an angel had human fathers.

It will happen by a miracle of God (v 35a). This is what we summarize with the words “conceived by the Holy Ghost.” It is not that the Holy Spirit is playing the role of a human father. Rather, he is beginning a life by supernatural means. The words of the Creed do not explain anything, really. But what else is there to say? Luther: “I do not understand that miracle. I would lose my faith if I tried to, and I would become a fool.”

Ἐψκιάζω is the verb used at Exodus 40:35 in LXX for the action of the Shekinah. It is not a euphemism for sexual intercourse.

But there is an even greater miracle than conception by a virgin: v 35b. The Holy One will be born of a sinner. See Galatians 4:4,5 for the purpose and the result. This is not only almighty power; it is also amazing grace. UBS (3rd ed.) inserts a comma between κληθήσεται and υἱός. NIV acknowledges this reading in a footnote. We prefer to read ἄγιον with γεννώμενον as subject and not as predicate nominative. The sense is not materially affected.

All this will take place because nothing is impossible with God (vv 36,37). Mary had not asked for a sign but Elizabeth’s condition is cited as a sign to strengthen the virgin’s faith. “Nothing is impossible with God” is a principle which supersedes everything we call laws of nature. The same thought was cast as a rhetorical question when Isaac’s birth was promised (Gn 18:14, LXX). Here it is indicative, a statement of fact. Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron (1:5) and Mary was a descendant of David (2:34; Ac 2:30, Ro 1:3, 2 Tm 2:8). That does not preclude their being συγγενεῖς through intertribal marriage at some point in the lineage of one or both.

“How will this be?” A baby is born to a virgin, the Son of God becomes a human being, a man who was executed by experts rises from the dead. Stubborn, sin-blinded, rebellious prodigals become and remain believing children of God. That is all God’s doing; “nothing is impossible with God.” Cp. Mt 19:25f.

IV. God's Servant Assents

Such faith is not necessarily connected with maturity in years. Remember Zechariah? It comes by grace (vv 28,30). It comes from the gospel which the angel proclaimed to her.

The angel left, but this Word of God remains to inspire us and teach us to say: “May it be to me as you have said.” It enables and motivates us to assent to His salvation and His direction.

Three: The Angelic Announcement to Joseph

Matthew 1:18–23

by John C. Jeske

One of the greatest earthly gifts our Creator has given us is our mind. Although there are those who believe the mind developed pretty much by chance, the Bible tells us that it is by design that you and I have our minds. God wanted to share some of his sacred secrets with us—secrets about who we are and who he is and what his plans for us are. He couldn’t very well have done that if you and I had been blocks of granite or puppy dogs or rain clouds. Our mind is the God-given vessel into which God can place his truth and by which we can take hold of the secrets God has seen fit to share with us.

God has, however, not given us our mind to decide whether to listen to him or not, or to pass judgment on his truth. As we consider the third of the “Angelic Announcements of Advent,” we hear of a man whom God asked to believe something that sounds wrong, something that doesn’t make sense. The incident about which this word of God revolves concerns two Jewish people who were pledged to be married. *“Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph.”* In the presence of witnesses they had publicly pledged their loyalty to each other for life. According to Jewish custom, however, a period of time—maybe months—elapsed between the day when the bride and groom publicly made those vows and the day when they would live together in the same home. One can guess the happiness that flooded Joseph’s heart as he looked forward to the day when he and his friends would go to Mary’s home to escort her to her new home.

And then one day the very bottom must have fallen out of Joseph’s life when *“she was found to be with child.”* We don’t know how Joseph became aware of Mary’s condition; one can guess news like that got around quickly in a village as small as Nazareth.

It may at first be difficult for us to appreciate Joseph’s predicament, because you and I know all the facts of the case; we’re used to confessing the truth of Christ’s Virgin Birth in the Creed every Sunday. Joseph didn’t know that. What was he to think? What would you have thought if you learned that your fiancée was pregnant? Would you have said: “How wonderful! Thank you, Lord”?

“Joseph...was a righteous man.” He wanted to live in accordance with the will of God, the God who takes very seriously the breaking of the marriage vow. Joseph could not and would not live in marriage with her who was pregnant without him. It seemed to him that he had two options. Jewish law gave him the right to announce Mary’s sin and to humiliate her publicly, but he loved her too much to do that. His other option was to make use of the liberal Jewish divorce laws. He could simply hand Mary a certificate of divorce, dismissing her quietly without taking the matter to court. This he decided to do. His mind told him this was the right thing to do under the circumstances.

It was right here that God gave Joseph an angelic Advent announcement. *“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.”* Here is an instance of how God’s wisdom puts human wisdom to shame. Joseph was asked to believe that the child his fiancée was carrying had no human father.

Far from divorcing her, Joseph was to *“take Mary home.”* Παραλαμβάνειν is to take to oneself; Mary was especially vulnerable just at this time and needed protection. Joseph would now be her provider and protector, defending her honor against slander. In addition, her child would now have a father, a legal guardian who was himself a *“son of David.”* Earlier verses of this chapter (7 and 16) make it clear that Joseph was a

descendant of David in the line of Solomon. If we're correct in assuming that the genealogy in Luke 3 is Jesus' genealogy through Mary, then the royal line of David was continued through Joseph legally, but physically through Mary (who descended from David's son Nathan, Lk 3:31).

It is the nature of human reason to judge only by what it sees. Joseph could understand that his beloved was soon to give birth to a human child. What he could learn only by divine revelation is that this child is "*Immanuel—which means ‘God with us.’*" The angelic announcement required Joseph to believe two miracles: one lesser, one greater. The lesser is the miracle of the Virgin Birth: that a child could be conceived and born without the agency of a human father. The greater miracle is that the eternal God, whom the heavens cannot contain, became a human being. But what God's angel says about how the Son of God became the Son of Man is true even if my brain says: "That doesn't make sense." Faith is giving the Holy Spirit credit for being more intelligent than we are.

The angelic Advent announcement was, however, not only a startling announcement for Joseph. It was also an announcement filled with comfort. "*She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*" The word *ἀμαρτία* reminds us that God has set a goal for the life of every one of his human creatures: to seek God's glory always and in everything. In an age which has an easy conscience about sin it goes against our grain to admit that we have missed the purpose for which our Creator gave us life. And right here is the reason why the Christmas celebrations of so many will fall flat again this year. Our sinful reason finds it terribly difficult to believe the judgment of God's law. When we read the words of the psalmist: "You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil... You hate all who do wrong" (5:4f), we cringe at the thought that God hates sinners. We try frantically to reinterpret the passage to say that God hates *sin*, not the *sinner*. Luther, an expert in law, understood God's anger with the sinner and it just about drove him insane until he learned to know what God's mercy had done to meet the demands of his righteousness. The Son of God became the Son of Man so that the God of infinite justice and revenge could show himself also as a God of infinite love and mercy. Christ became a human being first of all, to provide the obedience we had not given God, but then also to undo the disobedience we had given God. As Adam's sin became the sin of all men, so Christ's obedience is now the obedience of all men.

This is not human wisdom, but it is God's wisdom. We can understand why Luther could, on the one hand, say that our brain is a delightful gift of God and at another time describe it as the devil's bride, a harlot that would like to seduce us. As we approach Christmas we can be sure that, like Joseph, we are going to be considered a fool by somebody. There may have been those of Joseph's friends who felt he was acting unwisely in following a message he received in a dream. God, however, felt otherwise. The next weeks of our life will offer us daily opportunity to demonstrate whose fools we are going to be.

The double emphasis of the third of the angelic Advent announcements is indicated in the following outline:

God's Wisdom Puts Human Wisdom to Shame

I. In the way he chose to have the Son of God become the Son of Man

- A. The angel corrected Joseph's explanation of Mary's pregnancy.
- B. The angel announced the miracle of the Virgin Birth.
 - 1. The lesser miracle ("The virgin will be with child...")
 - 2. The greater miracle ("They will call him Immanuel")

Transition: There are many who couldn't care less whether the Son of God became Son of Man or not. But the Bible says this is important because it determined how sons of men become sons of God. Here again God put human wisdom to shame.

II. In the way he chooses to have sons of men become sons of God

- A. Our reason suggests: "Do the best you can!"
- B. God's angel announces: "Mary's child is the Savior from sin."
 - 1. Need for his human nature: God means business with his law
 - a. Christ met God's demand for perfect obedience

- b. Christ satisfied God's penalty for our disobedience
 - 2. Need for his divine nature: his work had to be adequate for a whole world of sinners
- Conclusion:* You're going to be somebody's fool. The question is "Whose?"