

**“The Announcements of the Promised One:  
Zacharias, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph,  
Shepherds, “Astrologists from Babylon”**

Meditating on the Christmas story is both a challenge and a delight, a delight because of the object and wonder under consideration. Words cannot describe the ‘wonder of wonders’ that God would grant to sinful, rebellious, unappreciative, and hostile mankind, the gift of His own beloved son, that Christ would come among us and the doing so should swell up within us tears of gratitude and praise. The challenge for the teacher/preacher is in teaching something that we have not heard since it is “the greatest story ever told” though the telling of it never gets old!

The approach that I have chosen today is to look at six events in the advent story (hopefully in chronological order of the response) by asking two questions in each case: first. what were the circumstances of the revelation of the coming of Jesus? Second, how did the person or persons respond?

First, the circumstance of the disclosure.

1. Zacharias: The Encounter (ca. 7-6 BC).

“...your wife will bear a son...after these days  
his wife conceived (Luke 1:13, 24).”

- a. The timing is the evidence of God in the minutiae (“his division” [Luke 1:8], “his was chosen to enter the temple [Luke 1:9]).
- b. Further, he and his wife were beyond the child-bearing years and childless. A greater miracle is about to happen (the clock of redemption is about to make a leap!).
- c. The male child will be the fulfilled of the promise of the coming of “Elijah” (Luke 1:17, Matt. 17:12).

2. Mary: The Encounter (6-5 BC).

“...you will conceive in your womb a son,  
and you shall call his name Jesus (Luke 1:31).

- a. Some six months later (Luke 1:26) a young, betrothed woman encounters an angel, specifically Gabriel.
- b. The conception of a son will be miraculous, by means of the Holy Spirit
- c. The child will be “...great, the Son of the Most High ...holy-the Son of God,” “he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:31-33).”

3. Elizabeth with Mary: The Encounter (6 BC).

“Blessed are you among women...  
the baby in my womb leaped for joy (Luke 1:44).”

- a. Shortly after the announcement to Mary, she went to visit her cousin in the hill country of Judea.
- b. Elizabeth’s pregnancy was proof of Gabriel’s declaration.
- c. She stayed with her cousin 3 months (Luke 1:56) which would be shortly before Elizabeth’s son was born and her pregnancy was evident.

4. Joseph: The Encounter (6-5 BC).

“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife,  
for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.  
She shall bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus... (Matt. 1:20-21).”

- a. It would seem that Joseph’s angelic-dream encounter took place shortly after Mary’s return from Judea.
- b. Joseph must have been a thinker-sort as well as tender-of-heart in his devotion to Mary; he sought to avoid embarrassment for her.
- c. Joseph likely was driven, in part, by fear (Matt.1:21), the horror of community gossip, broken promises, family intrigue.

5. Shepherds: The Encounter (5 BC)

“Do not be afraid; for I bring you good news...  
today in the city of David there has been born for you  
a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord (Luke 2:10-11).”

- a. In the darkness of the night, the sky became a blaze of glory and “the” angel announced that Jesus had been born that very day.
- b. Shepherds were considered with less esteem because their profession keeping them from regular temple worship and working on the Sabbath.

6. “Astrologers” from Babylon: The Encounter (5 BC).

“A star shall come forth, from Jacob,  
And a scepter shall rise from Israel (Num. 24:17).”

- a. This is the fourth Balaam oracle. Hired by Balak to curse Israel, he blesses each time instead.
- b. Balaam, a pagan Gentile who is later killed by Israel (Joshua 13:22), prophecies the coming of king in Israel, the “star being symbolic of royal splendor and power.

“...we saw His star in the East... (Matt. 2:2).”

- c. The Wise Men were likely Gentiles, the land of Israel's exile, who embraced biblical Judaism, anticipating the coming of the Promised one (an emphasis in Matthew). Matthew clearly indicates these were believers (Matt. 2:2b, “...[we] have come to worship him).

“Where is he who has been born the king of the Jews (Matt. 2:2a).”

“... the star went before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was... (Matt. 2:9).”

- d. The nature of the “star” makes one curious because of its reappearance from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and stoppage over a specific home. Did God command the star or was it an appearance of the glory of God in the sky as to Abraham (Acts 7:2).
- e. Jesus did not become a king; he was the king in His coming.

Second, some general observations about the disclosure.

1. The varied ways that God communicated to the six (four individuals and two groups (Shepherds and the Magi) is interesting (a dream: Joseph, celestial observations: Magi and Shepherds, Elizabeth: Zacharias; and angels: Zacharias, Mary, and the Shepherds).
2. In two cases (Zacharias and Mary, the angel identified himself [“I am Gabriel who stands in the presence of God” [Luke 1:19, 26].
3. Of the six, the immediate response of three was shock, leading to fear (Joseph: “do not be afraid” [Matt. 1:20]; Zacharias: “...fear gripped him” [Luke 1:12], “do not be afraid” [Luke 1:13]; and Mary: “greatly troubled” [Matt. 1:29], “do not be afraid” [Matt. 1:30]), the shepherds [“...they were terribly frightened” [Luke 2:9].

In each instance they were comforted by an angelic voice.

4. Zacharias and Mary responded by asking questions. The former was rooted in unbelief (“you did not believe” [Luke 1:20]; the latter was rooted in mechanics, being a virgin [Luke 1:34].
5. In two cases (Zacharias and Mary). God gave not only His word but evidential signs (“...you will be silenced and unable to speak until...” [Matt. 1:20]; “...your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age [Matt. 1:36]).
6. In two cases, the recipient made haste (Mary to see Elizabeth [Luke 1:39], the shepherds to see the babe [Luke 2:16]).
7. In only one case (the Magi) was there an offering of gifts (Matt. 2:11)
8. When you look collectively at the six, it tells us that among God's people are both rich (the Magi) and poor (the shepherds), that they are composed of Jews (Zacharias, Elizabeth, Joseph, Mary, the shepherds) and Gentiles (the Magi ).

9. The message revealed to all these people or groups is the same: the promise of the redeemer of man fills them and us with joyful exuberance, this one who is Lord, King at His coming.

Third, the consequences of the disclosure

1. Zacharias: He obeyed, though muted, using gestures to explain what had happened (Luke 1:22-24). It seems it took a vision!
2. Mary: She obeyed ("Behold the bondservant of the Lord be it done to me according to your word" [Matt. 1:38]).  
Also: it is not unbelief to seek empirical proof, especially of the unusual ("And Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, a city of Judah" [Luke 1:39]). Zacharias became mute!
3. Elizabeth: She obeyed. "And how has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" [Luke 1:43]. "...the baby leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she who believed..." [Luke 1:44-45].
4. Joseph: He obeyed the instruction immediately marrying Mary who was at the end of her first trimester (Matt. 1: 1:24). He interrupted the normal betrothal period and married her without marital consummation, by taking her into his parent's home.
5. The shepherds: They were thrilled and wanted to see the promised One! ("Let us go and see this thing that has happened" (Luke 2:)).

Because God is unlimited in power, integrity, and love, there is nothing that God cannot do or will not do for us if it is best for us and glorifies God.

He can bring to you comfort from the emptiness of the loss of a friend,  
or family member this year.  
He can heal your deepest of pain and sorrow from broken and unhealed  
relationships.  
He can meet all your needs in the coming days.  
He can give you a friend or friends if you are lonely.  
He can bring the wayward home.  
He can meet your health and financial needs.  
He can give you the strength you need every day.

Jesus has given us a wonderful promise:

"Ask, and it shall be given to you, seek, and you shall find,  
Knock, and it shall be opened to you, said Jesus (Matt. 7:7)."