

# Compassionate Creator

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BECOMING HUMAN  
FOR ME

BRUCE MORTON

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# Introduction

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For many people the words of *Silent Night* capture the scene of Jesus' birth. The tender intimacy between a young Jewish woman and her newborn son grace a night celebrated throughout the world. The story, though, is more than hers and that of her infant son. Her husband, Joseph, is part of the scene as well; so also are shepherds who visit. Further, wise men from the east begin a long and dangerous journey to see the new king. Their stories are like facets of a gem that sparkles with dazzling light. Nativity scenes at the end of the year have celebrated Jesus' birth with beautiful portraits. Popular religion has saturated the U.S. with the scene of Joseph, Mary, Jesus, animals, shepherds, and the wise men. Beloved expressions beam with hope and good cheer. The scenes, however, have hindered some of the story from being heard.

The uncommon, humble setting of Jesus' birth paints an image thoroughly unlike the Greek and Roman stories of supposed gods and goddesses. The story of Jesus announces that the compassionate and holy God lived among us. The simplicity of the story adds brushstrokes of wonder. The Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John announce that the Creator has come to His creation—become part of His creation! The idea of God's becoming human ushers in myriad wondrous thoughts about His earliest days, months, and years. As a newborn child, He opened His eyes to the captivating experiences of light and shadow. New sounds and smells surrounded Him. As His eyes matured, they were able to take in the amazing tapestry of the night sky. How should

we see what He saw? What should we make of the universe He made, especially the human body that walked the streets of His hometown? These and other questions raise the story from the mysterious to the astonishing.

The idea of a serene night is also quite unlike the storm that swirls around the story—both then and now. In the first century adversity drenched the oppressed land of Roman Palestine. On the night of Jesus' birth, Bethlehem was a city filled with unhappy people. Many had made a trip in hardship. They likely had little money to spare and may have had to raid emergency money stashes to make a trip they did not want to make. Like people whose bank accounts are worn by pressures that seem endless, much of Galilee and Judea suffered under harsh Roman and Jewish rule. Similar to others under great stress, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke reveal that Joseph and Mary were not Jerusalem nobility. They lived in the small Galilean town of Nazareth. So, what challenges did they experience during Mary's pregnancy (including her weariness, discomfort, and need for more food)? What did she and Joseph face as they raised Jesus?

What did their firstborn son see and hear growing up? What did He experience in a small Jewish town under Roman rule? What did He see in the religious practices in Nazareth and perhaps other villages? What actions of worship caught His eye as He walked through Jerusalem and through the temple? Did He see Gentile practices as well as Jewish in the cities, towns, and countryside of Palestine? What does His young life reveal about our own spiritual actions and growth? The Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us something of His growing up. So, also do His future teachings and actions. They reveal what shaped His tender, sensitive mind.

In our day the storm that swirls around the story is not from Roman and Jewish rule. Instead, it takes the form of doubt and dismissal. Some see the idea of the Creator of the universe coming

to a tiny blue dot in space as mere myth. For many the story stands at odds with our notions of fame, power, and leadership. The Rock musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* puts into the mouth of Judas the question and thought many feel, but do not verbalize. Talking to Jesus, Judas asks in the musical, “Why’d you choose such a backward time in such a strange land? If you’d come today you could have reached a whole nation. Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication.”<sup>1</sup>

Beyond questions of fame and timing, people also wrestle with the supernatural aspects of the story. Angels’ announcements highlight that God is involved. The Gospels announce that Jesus’ birth was a virgin birth by Mary. We can expect atheists and agnostics to look at the virgin birth of Jesus with disbelief. However, some religious leaders take the same path. What should we make of their doubts? (See Appendix B.)

*Compassionate Creator, Becoming Human For Me* peers into a world filled with a deep desire for honor and a strong aversion to shame.<sup>2</sup> Romans, Greeks, and Asians spent large sums of money to promote family honor. They inscribed expressions of honor on monuments for public reading. They gave banquets intended to “extend” family honor. They funded public festivities during special religious days. Why? An honorable name could mean a better job or marriage to a wife from a noble house. The Jewish elite were not far removed in their quest to look more Mediterranean. In contrast, shame smothered a lower-class birth and family. People from the small farming communities of Galilee did not get invitations to a feast at one of Herod’s palaces. Similarly, they did not expect to be honored guests among Judea’s affluent families or the households of Roman authorities.

The story of the Son of God stood a great distance from Mediterranean honor. His job as a craftsman who worked with wood was not considered prestigious. His death on a rough-hewn wooden cross was far removed from honor. It was a criminal’s

death. Romans intended for crucifixion to shout “shame”! So, who would have imagined the story of a crucified God? Romans? Greeks? Egyptians? Jews? No one fits. The crucifixion of Jesus “ran counter not only to Roman political thinking, but to the whole ethos of religion in ancient times and in particular to the ideas of God held by educated people.”<sup>3</sup> A similar question surfaces as we think of the beginning of Jesus’ life. Who would have written the story of Jesus’ birth to a lower-class family and in lowly surroundings—the first bed of God’s Son being a manger?! The question should settle deeply into our minds as we peer into the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Finally, Jesus’ story and that of His parents during his growing up are stories filled with hope. What fuels their hope? Their stories provide important examples when times of tears come to our eyes and when burdens isolate us. In a world riddled with challenges, the Gospel of Luke records wondrous words: “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:14, ESV). The good news shows us the closeness of the compassionate and holy God and His attention to all of His creation.

# The Compassionate and Holy One Is Coming!

(Luke 1:26-56, 67-79; 2:22-38; 3:1-22; Matthew 3)

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**T**he word *herald* may not be frequently used in our day. However, we are familiar with the idea. During the State of the Union Address, the President is announced with the words, “Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States.” A sportscaster announces a team as they take the field or court. The U.S. Navy announces, “Moored! Shift Colors!” with the return of a ship to port. Producers will herald the coming of a new motion picture. They roll out a brief preview prior to a feature film and even seed the Internet with trailers intended to build a frenzy of interest.

Similarly, the story of Jesus begins with announcements that should take our breath away. They are far from the casual events of life. They explode with light, like a dawn painting the sky. And they sound a tone of urgency. The words of the angel Gabriel, Mary, Zechariah, Anna, Simeon, and John the Baptist begin to turn Judea and Galilee upside down as they speak of the coming of the holy One of God.

## **Mary**

The story of God coming so close as to become human ushers in thought about His earthly parents, especially His relationship with His mother. Who was Mary? What was it like to be mother to Jesus? The thought of physically sustaining the Son of God as an infant is woven through history and art. Mary’s intimacy with her tiny son captures our thoughts. Seeing His eyes open. Touching His face. Speaking to Him. Watching His attentiveness

to her every word. Drying His tears. Hearing Him work to make words. These are wondrous thoughts.

Mary brought a face of warmth and love to a tiny little boy. Her smile shaped Him. As a result paintings, movie posters, and book covers try to show us Mary's face. Typically, the images are of a pretty Jewish young woman. Not surprisingly, marketers work to suggest that the Son of God saw a face of classic beauty.

We are a society that has invested itself greatly in outward beauty. On a monthly basis, U.S. manufacturers pour millions of dollars into the pages of *Elle*, *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Glamour*, *Marie Claire*, *Allure*, and other fashion magazines. They are intent on getting the attention of readers. Glossy advertisements, painstakingly prepared, are vehicles to persuade customers to purchase products or clothing. The goal? Accent or enhance physical beauty. Certainly, some makeup, a pair of shoes, or some new clothes can be of benefit—or even needed. However, judging from the amount of advertising in the nation, fashion can consume us. The quest for outward beauty can become obsessive.

The Gospels do not describe Mary of Nazareth's looks or intellect. They do not tell us if she was beautiful. Instead, Gabriel, the messenger of God, says, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28, ESV). Gabriel's address to a betrothed virgin of Nazareth is simple and brief. The supernatural messenger took but moments to speak, but his message is pronounced. Mary has found favor with God! Luke's record of the brief conversation includes a word for "favor" that is closely related to "grace" in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> Favor with God finds no parallel in this world. It is a thought that is beyond our comprehension because it begins with the One who is far above us.

The Creator does not describe Himself as beautiful, but His works are beautiful. They are good (Genesis 1). His creation has goodness and beauty because it reflects His beauty and His holiness. For that reason the psalmist says, "The heavens declare



the glory of God..." (Psalm 19:1). We see something of God's majesty in the dazzling magnificence of the night sky. It is the beauty of a spirit being who is both loving and wise. The Law of God unveils what brings beauty to the crown of his creation when the Law says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5). It is a love that transforms; it brings beauty into a world exhausted, dulled, and even made grotesque by spiritual darkness.

Gabriel reveals who Mary is in the sight of the Creator of the universe. A young Jewish woman from the small country village of Nazareth is a woman of godly beauty. People saw beauty that flowed from the depths of who she was. Her words of praise in response to the Lord's coming read like a wondrous tapestry made from meditation on the Psalms.<sup>2</sup>

The home in which Mary grew up was far removed from some of the Jewish thought that surrounded her. The Jewish oral law includes this statement by a rabbi: "If any man gives his daughter a knowledge of the Law it is as though he taught her lechery."<sup>3</sup> Instead, her praise at the coming of the Son of God reveals a woman who had written the Word of God on her heart. It tells us much about Mary and about her parents. Her home was a place where the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms were opened frequently—including to her. As a result, Mary of Nazareth would have had considerable wisdom. Her eyes would have reflected beautiful spiritual depth. She loved God, she loved the Lord's Word, and she loved those around her.

### **Gabriel's Announcement**

The announcement of Gabriel recorded in Luke 1:26-38 reveals the Creator's work to bring about the birth of the Son. Jesus was the mingling of divine and human. He was the Word, the revelation of God that became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14). We are told that His birth would be by a virgin (Luke 1:34). Gabriel

said to Mary that, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God”<sup>4</sup> (Luke 1:35). God’s announcement to Joseph revealed a message similar to that given to Mary: “that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1:20). The mystery of what Jesus’ genetic code looked like is forever beyond us. The 2008 film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, in which the alien visitor Klaatu takes human form, does not begin to get at the message of the Gospels. The One who made a dazzling array of galaxies—beyond what mere telescopes can see—entered our world as a newborn!

Further, the message of a holy being should grasp our attention tightly. He is a being untouched by evil, One who is gracious and abounding in love (Exodus 34:6). His holiness announces goodness. God’s appearance at Sinai revealed a being with power beyond our imagination (Exodus 19:9, 18). He is the One who lives in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16). Jesus’ coming revealed holiness in human form!

In response to Gabriel’s announcement to her, Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). She could have doubted, similar to Zechariah’s response at the announcement of John’s birth (Luke 1:18-20). Instead, her response is one of wonder and gratefulness. Her faith in God, in contrast to Zechariah’s unbelief, is telling. He was an elderly priest who had meditated on God and His Word for many decades. Yet he doubted. He let the years of his life and those of Elizabeth overrule his faith in God. Mary was a young woman whose response reveals a strong faith in the Lord. If we were watching the conversation between Gabriel and Mary unfold, the word *poise* would likely come to mind. Luke describes her as a woman who was discerning.<sup>5</sup> Even as she was troubled, she attempted to understand the greeting before speaking to Gabriel<sup>6</sup> (Luke 1:29). Her poise was more than a

matter of learning how to act and dress to impress; she was not schooled in the demeanor of noble houses and royalty. Instead, Mary is described as having had deep confidence in God and the wisdom such confidence brings.

### **Mary's Response of Praise**

The praise of Mary recorded in Luke 1:46-55 takes place during her visit with her cousin Elizabeth, who would bear a son to be called "John" (the Baptist). As Mary greeted her, the child leapt in Elizabeth's womb and she said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (Luke 1:42). With this, Mary's voice welled up in words of praise—perhaps in song. Henry J. van Dyke's words in *Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee* capture well what happened: "Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love; Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, opening to the sun above." Mary is full of thanks to the Lord. Her words unfold in beauty and majesty as they tell about God.

Mary's words in the text are brief, but they carry a wondrous aroma. They tell of the Lord's blessing to her and others and the actions of the coming Messiah. She rejoices, for the Lord has looked on her lower class status. Indeed, twice in her praise she mentions the lowly—those of "humble estate" (Luke 1:48, 52). He is a God of both compassion and holiness. She announces, "he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name." (Luke 1:49).

He is a God who "has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." (Luke 1:51). He has brought down the mighty and raised up those with little to claim. "He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty" (Luke 1:53). He has helped Israel, in keeping with His promise to Abraham and his descendants.

Mary announces that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a faithful God who sees the oppressed. He sees families forced

into the smallest of living spaces. His eyes catch the sight of worn clothes. He does not forget those whose work receives little wage and whose empty pockets have the weight of stone. He sees their eyes, weary from the emotional drain of poverty, indifference from others, and even dislike.

The supposed deities of the ancient world were understood as being influenced by images of power. The God of Abraham is thoroughly different. He raises up the oppressed and impoverished. He brings low those filled with a pride crafted from wealth, power, and the praise of others. They are not safe on their thrones or in their positions of influence. Their strength will crumble with the coming of the Messiah. Dallas Theological Seminary professor Darrell Bock concisely gets at the spiritual depth of what Mary says:

The *Magnificat* is rich in describing God's attributes, not as abstractions, but in terms of his everyday actions. Assurance comes from knowing that God acts in this way: faithful to his word and stretching out his mighty hand for those who stand humbly before him.<sup>7</sup>

Mary's praise points us to a woman who saw clearly the astonishing contrast between her humanity and what was taking place inside of her. She says simply that the God of Israel, "has looked on the humble estate of his servant" (Luke 48).

### **Anna and Simeon**

Luke records that when the time came for Jesus' purification under the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary brought him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord and to offer a sacrifice (Luke 2:22-24). When they entered the temple, they were met not only by ministering priests, but also by Simeon and Anna. The prophetess Anna went to them, gave thanks to God, and spoke of Jesus to all who were waiting for Jerusalem's redemption (Luke 2:38). Her words fill the temple with spiritual light, the radiance of a new day.

Similarly, the meeting of Simeon, Jesus, and Mary is described with little narrative. It did not carry the stuff of newspaper or Internet headlines. However, the temple narrative did reveal days, weeks, or more of anticipation. The Holy Spirit had unveiled to Simeon that he would not see death before he saw the Messiah. The Lord did not choose a High Priest. He chose Simeon. And Luke writes that Simeon “came in the Spirit into the temple” as Joseph and Mary brought their son with them to offer a sacrifice (Luke 2:27).

Simeon took Jesus into his arms and blessed God. The Gospel of Luke states the event simply. However, what Simeon said is drenched with both hope and comfort. He announced that, “my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:30-32). He announced that the child he was holding in the temple court was Israel’s salvation and as well salvation to the Gentiles. His words echo Isaiah 12:1 and 49:13. The prophet Isaiah talked about the coming King of Israel as one who would console his people. In the song *Mary, Did You Know?* Mark Lowry has penned beautiful words that announce the One who will deliver Mary and all of his people.

Simeon was also guided to say what Mary needed to hear to prepare her for the future: “A sword will pierce through your own soul...” (Luke 2:35). She would be a woman in anguish.<sup>8</sup> Mary would not have forgotten such a dramatic moment and message in the temple, the very center of Jewish religious life. The words came at the beginning of Jesus’ humanity, but they looked forward to agonizing hours at the end.

It is likely that Simeon’s words stunned Mary. The contrast with holding a beautiful child could not have been starker. One moment the world seemed good and bright, filled with the light and hope of the young Son of God. The next moment Simeon uttered words that shatter...but even these were for Joseph and

Mary's benefit. Joseph had comforted and supported Mary by taking her as his wife in difficult social circumstances.<sup>9</sup> He was there in another trying time, standing with her in the temple to comfort her, perhaps holding her close, after they both heard Simeon's words.

## **Zechariah**

John the Baptist grew up among parents who greatly anticipated his birth. After decades of feeling hope vanish, John was welcomed by the smiles of Zechariah and Elizabeth who loved the Lord and loved him deeply. He was a blessed little boy. The angel announced to Zechariah that, "you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth" (Luke 1:14, NKJV). The angel's announcement also revealed John's mission: "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared"<sup>10</sup> (Luke 1:16-17, ESV).

In response to John's birth, Zechariah prophesied about the child in their midst. His words are filled with reflection on God's promises and his coming salvation. He spoke of the coming Savior with the language of a breaking dawn: "...the sunrise shall visit us from on high..." (Luke 1:78). He spoke of his son with dramatic words: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God..." (Luke 1:76-78). John heralded the Creator of the universe, a God who is both compassionate and holy.

## **John the Baptist**

About 30 years after Gabriel's appearance to Mary, John appeared in the wilderness outside of Jerusalem. He was there to announce

the coming of the Lord (Luke 3:4). Were we to be told that in our day that the Creator of all was coming to earth, the news would be a shock in much of the earth. Questions would swirl in billions of minds. What does He look like? How does the Creator travel? What does He want? The earth would tremble at the thought that a being powerful enough to create stars was coming!

The ambassador's presence alone would turn nations and economies on their heads. Business leaders would be faced with the grinding halt to their businesses; peoples' minds would be filled with the news. Distraction on a scale far greater than ever seen before would consume the planet. Children, teens, single adults, couples, families would talk together as they tried to make sense of the unimaginable. World leaders would dress in fine clothing to receive Him. Journalists would scramble to gather "a story." The ambassador's words would fill—even break—the Internet.

Many first-century Jews had similar great expectations. Some (or many) may have expected the herald of the Messiah to be at home among the nobility of Jerusalem. During His public ministry, Jesus asked the Jews gathered around Him about John. "What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses" (Matthew 11:8).<sup>11</sup> John's clothing was not that of wealth, but instead that of a "wilderness man." Jesus revealed by His statement something of His own clothing, for He, too, was not of the nobility of Jerusalem.

God shows us in John's life—and also Jesus'—that He does not work as we expect. Human rationale is confused by God's herald. John did not preach in the temple or a synagogue. He does not carry his message to the streets of Jerusalem. He walked the wilderness.<sup>12</sup> He is described in Scripture as clothed in a garment of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist—the simplest of garments (Matthew 3:4). His clothing is similar to that of the

prophet Elijah: “He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather around his waist” (2 Kings 1:8). John’s food, too, was that of the wilderness: locusts and wild honey!

We do not know how John’s work as herald began. Luke records simply that, “during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas the word of the God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness” (Luke 3:2). As people heard John, word spread, and crowds formed. What drew them? They went out to see a man of boldness, one unmoved by the political and spiritual forces that swirled around him.<sup>13</sup>

He announced the Messiah’s coming with words from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 40:3). “The imagery of making ‘straight’ and level paths is based on the fact that ancient wilderness roads were notoriously poor.”<sup>14</sup> They could also be dangerous. Even in the time of Isaiah, the idea of making a road ready for a king was an ancient one. For example an inscription dated to 2,340 B.C. calls for making a path straight for a coming Sumerian ruler.<sup>15</sup> But the action has its own present-day expressions. We see it, for instance, whenever the Secret Service prepares for a U.S. President’s motorcade.

John was calling for a “highway for God”! However, his text does not speak of a stone and mortar roadway, no road made of Roman concrete. It exceeds the grandeur of the Processional Way to the Ishtar Gate of Babylon. John did not describe a road of gold or one decorated with jewels, but of one far more wondrous. He speaks of a highway made up of peoples’ hearts—their minds, their emotions.

John was calling for people to change both spiritually and morally in anticipation of God’s arrival.<sup>16</sup> He was calling for repentance, and he spoke with urgency: “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:10). His words stirred the emotion of the crowds that had come



to the wilderness to hear him. They asked him, “What then shall we do?” (Luke 3:10). His response got at the darkness that had overwhelmed the poor. He called for people to share their clothes. He called on tax collectors and soldiers to act justly. And he told the soldiers to be content with their salaries.

Jesus’ coming to be baptized by John prepared Him for His own mission. In His baptism, He is identified with all those who, by accepting John’s baptism, had declared their desire for a new beginning with God.<sup>17</sup> That new beginning comes with the Holy One of Israel, the Son upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rests (Isaiah 11:2).

## **Conclusion**

The words of the angel Gabriel, Mary, Zechariah, Anna, Simeon, and John filled the world with the crimson, orange, and yellow hues of a wondrous dawn coming to the earth. The announcements of Jesus’ coming called on people to listen, consider the words, and act on them. At times the result was that they were called to accept sobering responsibilities.

We, too, can feel great spiritual and ethical pressure in following the Lord. It can bear down on us, urging us to rationalize away some of Jesus’ teachings. We can let the power of our culture bend us—or even break us after a time. Indeed, in our day, distraction and doubt increasingly pull at us and tear us away from reading Scripture. God is calling us to be a people of resolve—determined to avoid distraction and to give ourselves to doing His will.

Equally important, John’s urgency shows us the character of the Holy One’s coming. It was not conveying “a casual discipleship” or “just another Sunday morning.” His urgency announced God’s imminent arrival and the need for repentance. Today’s followers of Jesus need to hear closely the words of John and grab tightly the importance of the Creator’s Word for our day as much as 2,000 years ago.