

## **There Is Another King: Jesus** *The Gospel of Luke – The Acts of the Apostles*

### **Advent Week 4: Why Is God's Love the Baby Jesus?**

#### ***Luke 2:1 – 20***

Last modified: December 18, 2022 for Neighborhood Church of Dorchester

#### **Introduction: What Makes This Love?**

Christians honor the coming of Jesus as an act of God's love. Love. But why is it love? If I dropped off a baby at your house, would you think that's love? Wouldn't it complicate your life? You'd say, "Mako, you want me to care for this baby? Okay, but I'm doing you a favor, and you owe me big time." In the Harry Potter story, when Dumbledore dropped off the 1 year old Harry to his Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, they were not that excited. "Another mouth to feed? We don't even like that side of the family!"

So we always need a little reminder and explainer. You would feel confused if I dropped a baby off with you. If I said, "I'm doing this because I love you," you'd feel even more skeptical, maybe resentful. But why is it love when God does it?

#### **Relevance**

What makes Christmas even more challenging is that our culture today believes that we know what love is. Love is the almost the opposite of handing them a baby. Love is helping a person fulfill their dreams. Love is saying, "You do you! And I'll cheer you on, every step of the way!" It's setting people free from unwanted obligations and unwanted relations. What kind of God says, "I love you, and here's how I show it: You get to take care of My baby"? What kind of God does that?

Let's retell the story. And let's get to know this God, once again, through the stories of Mary and Joseph, aka Miriam and Yosef.

#### **Miriam**

Miriam of Nazareth walked with another young woman, Rivkah, by the Roman guards standing near the well. Each carried a water pot with rope attached. She hoped that the growing shadows of the setting sun would help her hide what she carried in her brown dress. "You there," shouted one, "Fetch us some water." Miriam and Rivkah stiffened. Miriam first tucked her small clay lamp between her left arm and her body, then lowered the water pot into the well by its rope. She pulled the pot up and offered it to the Roman guards. Rivkah did the same, avoiding eye contact. The Romans laughed cruelly, that they could make women do this work for them. But they did not notice Miriam's left arm's more limited movement, or Rivkah's. Miriam and Rivkah went home relieved. Miriam left her clay lamp at Rivkah's home, which was close to hers. Rivkah's home had a trap door covering a large storage pit. It had two levels. Jews in Nazareth used storage pits like this to hide crops, goods, even weapons, from the Romans. Miriam helped deliver these lamps to families so they could light these storage rooms. But Miriam had another reason for delivering these clay lamps. She loved light. She imagined the Jews lighting the clay lamps not in their homes, but outdoors, matching the stars in heaven with flames on earth. Miriam pressed the clay lamp into Rivkah's hand, and before turning to go home, said, "Light has come."

Miriam wondered when God would shine His light forth from Israel into the darkened world. She meditated on the blessing of Numbers, "The Lord make His face shine upon you" (Numbers 6:22 – 27), even teaching herself to read that much by studying the scraps of parchment on which that blessing was written. Women did not usually learn to read, so Miriam's father and mother, and brothers and sisters, looked upon her with puzzlement. Not only did Miriam memorize much of Scripture, having a very good memory, her hope burned unusually bright. When Miriam agreed to Yosef's wedding proposal and the two became betrothed, Miriam's family wondered what kind of wife and mother she would become. For her part, Miriam just assumed that Yosef would be just as enthusiastic as she was about the things of God.

One day when Miriam was at home without her family members, a light shone around her. The angel called Gabriel stepped forward and said, "Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God."

Miriam stood up, torn between the urge to sprint out of the house and the urge to put her face to the ground. “Who are you?” she said.

“Gabriel,” said the angel.

“Gabriel – you came to Daniel the prophet in Babylon (Daniel 9:20 – 27) to speak of the coming king. Is that time coming?”

Gabriel replied, “It is. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Yeshua. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (Luke 1:31 – 34).

Miriam knew of the times God gave a child supernaturally to certain women: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah. In each of those cases, God overcame old age or barrenness. But in each of those cases, God worked with a husband and wife, so they could give themselves to another, to the next generation. But Miriam wasn’t married yet. So Miriam said to Gabriel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

Gabriel chuckled at this young woman. She understood him correctly. She could have asked, “When Yosef and I are married, how soon will the baby come?” But no: She understood that God meant right now, before the wedding, with just her and without a man! So he said to her, “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 holy; he will be called Son of God.” (Luke 1:35 – 36).

Miriam thought to herself, “So God will be the Father of my son? And my son will be the promised king, who we’ve been waiting for, who will repair the world?” Miriam had the picture in her mind of a light descending into her, into her womb, waiting to be born, to shine forth. This was God’s new life, taking up the old life, her mortal human life, from within. As if making that same point, Gabriel said, “And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son [as well], and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:36 – 37). God places new life in the midst of fragile life, a mortal life, a dying life? Yes, because Elizabeth hoped in God, and God responds to hope with love. So Miriam said, “Here am I, the servant, the handmaiden, of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Then Miriam realized that elderly Elizabeth was already six months pregnant. “I have to go talk to her!” Miriam made the four day journey with other travelers, and her faith and body felt stronger with each day. But she couldn’t tell anyone her secret. In fact, she wondered if Elizabeth would believe her, if Yosef would believe her. Finally, she came to the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Elizabeth was in bed, and Miriam didn’t have to explain why she was visiting.

Elizabeth already knew, and she said while Mary was in the doorway, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy...” (Luke 1:42 – 44).

Miriam felt not alone. She said, “Elizabeth, the Lord told me you are with child, after all these years. So I came to be with you, to surprise you, to bless you.”

Elizabeth reached out her hand. “I am blessed. And everyone here is already congratulating me. But your road will not be easy, and you and the child in your womb will need far more courage than what has been asked of me. Does anyone else know? Yosef? Your parents? Your brothers and sisters in Nazareth?”

“No one, yet,” answered Miriam. She saw the concern on Elizabeth’s face.

Elizabeth gripped Miriam’s hand tightly and said, “Many will doubt you. Many will not believe you, at least at first. But blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

And the song that Miriam had been composing in her heart poured forth, a mixture of redemption songs and revolution anthems like the Song of the Sea sung by Moses and Miriam after the Exodus, and the 107th Psalm.

<sup>46</sup> My soul exalts the Lord,  
<sup>47</sup> And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.  
<sup>48</sup> For He has had regard for the humble state of His handmaid;  
For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.  
<sup>49</sup> For the Mighty One has done great things for me;  
And holy is His name.  
<sup>50</sup> And His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear Him.  
<sup>51</sup> He has done mighty deeds with His arm;  
He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart.  
<sup>52</sup> He has brought down rulers from their thrones,  
And has exalted those who were humble.  
<sup>53</sup> He has filled the hungry with good things;  
And sent away the rich empty-handed.  
<sup>54</sup> He has given help to Israel His servant,  
In remembrance of His mercy,  
<sup>55</sup> As He spoke to our fathers,  
To Abraham and his descendants forever.’

Elizabeth replied, “To Abraham. Here’s how an old woman like me and a young woman like you can know God is doing a great thing. When Abraham and Sarah were in their old age, and God gave them their son Isaac, Sarah became jealous of the young woman Hagar for becoming pregnant. But I am not jealous. I am only grateful. Only grateful.”

Miriam stayed three months with Elizabeth and Zechariah. When Miriam returned to Nazareth, now just over three months pregnant, she went to tell Yosef. She hoped he would be just as excited.

### **Yosef**

Yosef sat alone in his small work area in his home. He shook his left thumb to shake off the pain -- he had accidentally hit himself with the hammer earlier that day. He hadn’t slept, and he was exhausted. The dust settled around him. The doubts settled on his heart and mind.

Yosef’s younger brother Asher walked in. They had worked together on a table that Yosef thought they would use for his wedding. He thought of Miriam’s eyes, which sparkled with her wit and playfulness and beauty and love for God for as long as he had known her. The whole family had been at work for a year – saving, planning, organizing the food, the wine, the music – like any good family of the groom.

But yesterday, Miriam came to tell him that she was already pregnant with a son. But there was no other man, she insisted. She said it was God alone, a miracle from God, announced by an angel. Her eyes had searched his, hoping to see trust there, even excitement. But Yosef couldn’t muster it. He felt only shock and disappointment. Miriam was known for her honesty, even blunt honesty, but Yosef now felt the awful feeling that he didn’t know her. When Roman guards patrolling the streets came in their direction, Miriam turned to hurry home. She turned one last time. As they stood there in silence, they saw tears in each other’s eyes.

Asher sat on the ground next to Yosef. The brothers sat together in a long silence. Yosef looked at the table. Imagining food on it made his stomach turn over. Should he call off the wedding? Asher finally broke the silence and spoke of their middle brother, Netanel. “When Netanel left to follow Theudas son of Hezekiah, father and mother hoped you would marry quickly and have children quickly. But there’s no rush.” Asher referred to Hezekiah, who led a Jewish revolt against Herod the Great and the Romans 35 years ago. Now his son Theudas was laying the groundwork for another uprising.

Yosef felt torn. “Sometimes I think I should go join Netanel. I could pick up a sword, too, and go train with Theudas. Maybe Theudas will be more successful than his father before him, leading our people. Netanel isn’t the only one who hopes that the lineage of David still matters. We sons of David might still do our people some good.”

“Please don’t do that,” laughed Asher. “If you and Netanel are both out risking your lives, all of father and mother’s hopes will fall onto me, Yosef. I’d be crushed!”

Yosef said, “But what are we doing, Asher? We are sons of David, and all that we do goes awry. It’s not just my engagement. There’s more. There’s not even that many of us left, because of men like Theudas. God promised to restore the world through David’s heirs, through the promised one. His torah will go forth from Zion, and they will beat their swords into plowshares (Isa.2:3 - 4). But God also said the sword will never depart from David’s house (Samuel 12:10). He said that to David -- to David himself for David’s own sin -- through Nathan the prophet. Then there was King Jeconiah, right before the exile. God said none of his descendants will prosper sitting on the throne of David, or ruling again in Judah (Jeremiah 22:30). He said that through Jeremiah the prophet. How are we -- the sons of David -- to give our people hope? Dare we keep any hope for ourselves?” Yosef paused.

“On the other hand,” said Asher, “the prophet Isaiah said something about a virgin woman being with child. Do you think, Yosef, that --?”

“I don’t know, Asher. Miriam said there was no man. She says it is God alone.”

Asher asked, “Does anyone else know about Miriam? Does anyone else believe it?”

Yosef replied, “Distant cousins, she says, near Jerusalem. An old priest named Zecharias and his wife Elizabeth. Miriam just got back from a visit there. They are without children. But an angel came to them, Miriam says. The same angel who came to her. Elizabeth is now with child. They believe Miriam.”

Asher said, trying to be helpful, “Though it’s a four day journey, you could go visit them. Teachers like Gamaliel say the time draws near for the prophecies to be fulfilled.”

“I could go,” said Yosef, “but what would it prove? I believe the prophecies. That’s not the issue. But the more people pay attention to the prophecies, the more they try to claim them. Our own brother Netanel believes Theudas is fulfilling the prophecies by preparing an uprising. Does that mean Netanel and Theudas are right? What if they claim the Scriptures for their own purposes? This is why there are fewer of us, sons of David! And Miriam. She’s brilliant. She knows the prophecies, too. But what if she reaches for them... for her own purposes?”

Asher said, “I see what you mean, Yosef. Our people have been deceived before.”

“Some of our people have been the deceivers, too,” said Yosef. “I could cover for Miriam, but in the end, what would that accomplish? The child of promise is supposed to lead our people. But how could Miriam’s child ever lead us? This child would be born four months after our wedding. Nazareth has 400 people. People will notice. And people will doubt. Miriam’s son will always live in the shadow of rumors. Could he lead us? And besides that, something I know for certain is this: the child is not mine. What if Miriam loves another man? Or what if she is losing her mind?”

Asher stood up. He stretched his legs. He put his hand on the table. “Are you going to call it off, then?” he asked.

“I think so,” said Yosef.

“Well,” Asher replied, “seeing as little brothers don’t get married before older brothers, this sets me back, too.” Yosef laughed. But Asher said, “I am sorry.”

That night, Yosef went to sleep, exhausted. He had a dream. An angel of God appeared to him and said, “Yosef, son of David.”

“Son of David? What good is that name, anymore?”

“Yosef, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Miriam as your wife. For the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit of God. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Yeshua, meaning, “salvation,” for he will save his people from their sins.”

In the dream, Joseph bowed low to the ground. “Do you mean, my lord, that it is true? Miriam is telling the truth?”

“Yes, Yosef,” said the angel. “This child will be the greatest of all the sons of David, greater than David himself. For he will overcome the dishonors of the house of David, and restore honor to the throne, to the people of Israel, and to your own family. If you call him your son, then through you, he shall claim the throne of your father David. This is to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet Isaiah, “Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, “God with us.”

In the vision of his dream, Joseph bowed low to the ground again. “Forgive me! Do you mean, my lord, that Miriam still loves me?”

Yosef woke early, full of wonder. He prayed his morning prayers, thanking God for the baby boy that he would soon hold. The baby would embody God’s love and faithfulness. He turned to the table, and put his hand on it. He thought of his family. He thought of Miriam. He thought of their wedding banquet to come. Yosef worked on the table, and as the sun rose, so did his hope, and his love.

### **Miriam**

The wedding took place two months later, and it was festive. Miriam saw the steadiness in Yosef’s eyes. She laughed and wept for joy. She also saw Rivkah and Asher glancing at each other; that was interesting! At five months, Miriam was starting to show, but no one outside her family knew about her pregnancy, and they were very tight-lipped. Miriam’s younger sisters believed her, knowing Miriam to be honest. But they were all nervous how everyone else would take the news eventually.

In another three months, though, the Roman Emperor decreed a census, and Yosef and Miriam had to travel to Bethlehem to register, along with others in Yosef’s family, since that was their family’s home in years past. Miriam could not hide her pregnancy any longer, especially while they stayed with another family in their home, because every other inn and guest room in Bethlehem was full. Some came to Yosef and Miriam, asking them why Miriam was pregnant so soon. Miriam told the story of what God said to her. Yosef did the same.

“Impossible,” whispered some. “But God has given us two witnesses,” said others. Miriam said passionately, “More than two! Elizabeth gave birth to a son for her husband Zechariah, and they believe.” And Yosef and his brother Asher argued, “God has not done such a thing since the elder days. This is Sarah and Abraham retold, but more, Hannah and Elkanah retold, but more. These sons are children of promise. They are signs of God’s love for us.”

Yosef’s and Asher’s brother Netanel was there, and he went away, angry, and filled with doubt.

Then Miriam felt the contractions start. She gathered several women around her in the house. After the long hours of laboring, she held her son. Together, Yosef and Miriam named him Yeshua. Miriam imagined the small clay lamps, and everyone in Nazareth lighting them in the open. Just then, they heard the shepherds shouting in the street, telling everyone that they had seen the light of God’s angels, and that their light had filled the night sky. Miriam turned to Yosef and said, “Light has come.”

### **Conclusion**

So why does God give us the baby Jesus to show us His love? How is giving a baby an act of love? Because of who this baby is. He is God and the Son of God, incarnate. And he shows us what kind of God our God is. In Jesus, God honors our vulnerability and shares in our struggles. In Jesus, God shines through our humanity because He put the light there in the first place, even though we have dimmed that light. In Jesus, God honors our humanity, and heals it despite the damage we’ve done to ourselves, because He would live the life we could never live to heal the wound we could never heal. In Jesus, God reveals Himself as the one who enters into our world because He is the one who has never left it.