

**New Birth**

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**Luke 1:39** In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, **40** where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. **41** When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit **42** and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. **43** And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? **44** For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. **45** And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

**46** And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,  
**47** and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
**48** for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
**49** for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
**50** His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.  
**51** He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
**52** He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
**53** he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.  
**54** He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
**55** according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."  
**56** And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

## NEW BIRTH CHANGES EVERYTHING

New birth.

It changes everything.

Many of you remember the birth of your first child.

Was anything ever the same again after the birth of that first child?

No.

New birth changes everything.

New birth changes your priorities.

It changes the kind of car you drive.

It changes the way you shop for food.

It changes your relationship with your parents.

New birth.

It changes everything.

But, most of all it changes your heart.

If there is a new birth in the family, your world is turned upside down.

Sometimes it's hard.

But, most of the time it is an incredible blessing.

That's why the Bible uses new birth as a way of talking about the intervention of God.

Just as the birth of a new baby turns our world upside down so the birth of God's kingdom turns the whole world upside down.

## ABRAHAM AND SARAH

It began with Abraham.

When Abraham was an old man, God told him to leave home and go to the place that God would show him.

Now as I've gotten older I've learned one thing.

I like to stay at home.

I like the familiar and the comfortable.  
I'm not interested in anything new.  
I long for the old, the good old days.

And yet God didn't allow old Abraham to stay at home.  
He had to go on a journey ... with no roadmap.

And Abraham, God bless him, had enough faith to go.  
He loaded up everything on pack animals and struck out into the desert.

And while Abraham was in the wilderness looking up at a sky filled with stars,  
God said,  
"I'm going to make a great nation out of you.  
Your ancestors will be as numerous as the stars in the sky."

He asked,  
"How can this be?"  
"I'm an old man and my wife is no spring chicken either!"

And the Lord said,  
"Your wife Sarah is going to have a son.  
New birth is going to come into your life."

How did Abraham and Sarah respond to that promise?  
They laughed out loud.

"A couple with one foot in the nursing home is now going to have the other foot in  
the maternity ward?"

They smacked their hands together and said,  
"That's a good one Lord. Nobody can say you don't have a sense of humor."

But, of course the Lord had the last laugh.

When Sarah was 90 and Abraham was 100, they had their first child.  
And what did God tell them to name this child?  
Isaac, which means "he laughs or he will laugh."

Incredible new birth, and the world is filled with laughter.

You see this birth was about more than just an old man and woman miraculously  
having a child. It was about God coming to earth.

The Lord told Abraham that not only would a great nation come from him; through him the whole world would be blessed.

## ECHOES OF THE GRACE TO COME

That's why genealogy is so important in the Old Testament (and the New Testament as well for that matter).

The story of Abraham tells us that new birth is about more than just the continuation of the species. New birth is God's way of working God's purposes out through the lives of men and women.

Incredibly, there is more to the story than meets the eye with all of us.

God is working in us and through us.  
No birth is without meaning or hope.

And on one night long ago, God even came and dwelt among us through the miracle of new birth.

Many stories in Scripture echo the grace that is to come.

For example, Hannah who was thought to be barren passionately prayed to the Lord.

She told the Lord,  
"If I can just have a child I will dedicate him to your service."

And when Hannah miraculously gave birth to a boy named Samuel she made good on her promise.

She dedicated him to the Lord, and he became one of Israel's greatest prophets.

## A SONG

Hannah even sang a song when she learned that she was pregnant, and that song echoed a line that Mary would sing later on.

Hannah and Mary sang about a new world coming.  
In this world things would be turned upside down because of the new birth that God brings.

The mighty will be knocked off their high horse.

The poor will be lifted up.

In other words, the advent of this miraculous birth signaled the beginning of the Kingdom of God.

And this God has an agenda.

God is going to bring justice and righteousness into a world that was self-centered. God is going to work through the meek and the lowly instead of the high and mighty.

God is going to bring about peace and reconciliation in a world that is hell bent on destruction.

### SAVIOR INCOGNITO

Now is this how the world works?

Of course not.

The world believes in the power of money and military might.

But, God makes a mockery of the powers that be.

God chooses to come among us as through the birth of a baby.

The world, except for a few shepherds and some eccentric astrologers didn't even notice when Jesus was born.

It's understandable.

Who looks for a king who is born in a stable?

Do you think if Jesus was born among us today, that we would be able to recognize him?

I doubt it.

You may remember there was a controversy involving the First Presbyterian Church of Orlando a few months back. Someone had donated a large sum of money to pay for a sculpture that was placed on the grounds of the church.

This work of art was a park bench with a very lifelike portrayal of a homeless person sleeping on that bench.

Copies of this statue have been placed on church grounds all over the country, and it always draws mixed reviews.

Many people don't like it.  
And they like it even less when the meaning of this artwork is explained.

Upon closer inspection the bare feet of this homeless person is nail scarred.  
This isn't just any homeless person.  
This is Jesus.

Some people said that they shouldn't have spent so much money on this work of art, that the money should have given the money to the poor.

And some complained about the sculpture's realism. They said that there are enough real people sleeping on the streets without making a statue that portrays this.

In Davidson, NC the homeless Jesus prompted complaints to the police about a vagrant sleeping on a park bench. And when one resident was told what the sculpture was supposed to represent he replied that it "demeaned" Jesus.

## DISTORTED NATIVITY

I find it interesting that much of the art concerning Jesus portrays him in a very elevated way.  
Take, for example the portrayal of his birth.

I saw a nativity scene at Celebration that was typical.  
It was set among the lights and the decorations that have come to symbolize the season.

The baby Jesus had a little halo around his head.  
He had blond hair and shiny blue eyes so large that they were almost startling.

The farm animals seem remarkably docile  
And the shepherds who come from the fields to worship are immaculately dressed.

But, that's not the story.

The little baby was born to a poor woman in a stable.  
The baby was not from Norway.  
He was from the Middle East and no doubt looked the part.

The crib for this child was a feeding trough.

The shepherds who came to worship were common workers who were despised by many in society and probably smelled like the sheep that they tended.

There was no glory in the way Jesus was born.

His birth was the exact opposite of how a king would come into the world.

And yet, we believe that God was in this birth.

In the birth of this child, God is changing the world forever.

## ZECHARIAH

Even the most faithful among us have a hard time believing in the miracle of God's new birth.

In Scripture that precedes our lesson for today, Zechariah is also given some news about a new birth.

Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth was well beyond child bearing age. She was thought to be barren.

But, while Zechariah is serving in the Temple, God's messenger, Gabriel comes to him (as he will later come to Mary). And the angel says to Zechariah in a scene that is reminiscent of God's revelation to Abraham,

“Elizabeth is going to have a child, a little boy.

His name is going to be John, and his ministry is going to be a lot like the prophet Elijah's.

He's going to get the people ready for the coming of the Lord.”

Zechariah also sounded a lot like Abraham in his response to this astonishing news.

He said,

“How can this be? I'm an old man and my wife is no spring chicken either.”

And the angel replied,

“If you don't have anything good to say, then just keep quiet. Once the baby is born, then you'll be able to speak again.”

And Zechariah couldn't say a word until his son was born.

## WITH HASTE TO THE HILL COUNTRY

But, today we hear the story of one who was able to accept the promise of new birth from the angel. Her name was Mary.

She believed that nothing was impossible with God.  
She believed that the presence of God could be born in her.

She believed that God had chosen her.

And she also accepted the invitation of the angel Gabriel.  
She would see for herself the miraculous thing that had happened to her older relative, Elizabeth.

And so Mary goes “with haste” to the Judean hill country to visit Elizabeth.

Why was she in such a hurry?  
We can’t know for sure, but I would suggest that after the angel leaves, Mary is suddenly, dangerously alone except for the child that she carries.

Whom can she trust in such a situation?  
She can trust the one who also knows the power of God’s life giving miracle.

Mary can find sanctuary, a safe place with her cousin, Elizabeth.

So, Mary runs for the hills, the hill country of Judea.  
She flees to the one person who can hold her and protect her.

Mary is not disappointed.  
Elizabeth greets Mary warmly.  
And so does the child that Elizabeth will soon bear.

John the Baptist begins his preaching even before he is born!

He leaps for joy in Elizabeth’s womb.  
And Elizabeth filled with the Holy Spirit gives Mary the affirmation that she so sorely needed,

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

Unlike Zechariah, Elizabeth doesn’t question what God can do. She knows. She’s seen it in her own life, and now she sees it in Mary.

God's new birth is in the womb and soon the world will change forever.

In response to Elizabeth's greeting and blessing Mary sings for joy.

In her song she imagines a world where God's kingdom comes and God's will is done ... on earth as it is in heaven.

Funny thing about Mary's song.  
It's in the past tense.

It's as if in that one blessed moment Mary can see the world not as it is but the world as God is going to make it.

## SANCTUARY

The Bible tells us that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months.  
That's quite a long visit, but Mary needed that time.

She needed a safe space to contemplate what God had called her to do. She needed the sanctuary that Elizabeth provided.

It seems to me that we need the same thing.  
We need the same kind of sanctuary, the same kind of safe space as the Word of God is born within us.

Like Mary we need someone who understands the call of God. We need someone who can bless us in our journey of faith.

We need someone who believes that the Word of God can take hold of us and make us into a new creation.

We need someone who believes that new birth is possible.  
We need someone who knows what it means to be born again, and can encourage us as we contemplate the call of God.

What a blessing it is to find a person like this!  
When we find a person like this we don't walk.  
We run with anticipation toward them.

This is what the church is all about.  
In the church, we are called to be like Elizabeth and Mary.

We are called to be like Elizabeth, in that we bless others and giving them a safe space to prepare for the Lord who comes.

We are called to be like Mary, in that we believe the message of the angel. New birth is possible for all of us.

We believe that just as God was in Christ so God can be in our lives as well. No matter how old we are; no matter how young we are God can and does come into our lives.

New birth.

That's the message for today.

Amazing. Astounding. Life changing.

It's not just something we read about.

It's something we experience for ourselves.

So let us make that journey with Mary.

Let us go with haste to the hill country and see for ourselves what God has done.

The grace of God has made new birth possible.

And the glory of the Lord is about to shine forth upon us.

Amen.