

It wouldn't have happened that way otherwise

(Matthew 3:1-12)

10:00am Holy Communion – 7th December 2025

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."'

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

<Prayer>

I'm going to be straight into the point of my sermon today, because my plan is to make a grand sweep over the whole of the Nativity story – so it's quite a lot to cover. As you come to carol services, Christingles and Christmas, **my hope is that you will be primed for a very important point** that links the whole nativity story together. So, let's start back in March, as we have it, nine months before – the Annunciation to Mary.

The Annunciation

Luke tells us this – 'In the sixth month **the angel Gabriel was sent by God** to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph.' Mary was greatly **troubled**, but reassured: 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.'

Look here for the action of God in a personable way (an angel), and the reaction of a person (in this case Mary). What happens to Mary is inconceivable, yet she does conceive, and remains a virgin. The annunciation is important in God's plan, **but it wouldn't have happened that way otherwise.**

Zechariah (the father of John the Baptist)

This elderly and childless priest – Zechariah – was serving in the Jerusalem Temple, offering incense as prayers to God. Luke tells us: 'Then there **appeared to Zechariah an angel of the Lord.** When Zechariah saw him, he was **terrified**; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.'

Later, this child will be John the Baptist, who was in effect a returning prophet from the days of old, to be a herald to the people that God was sending his Son. Actually, Zechariah ends up in a bit of a row with the angel (Gabriel again), **because he can't believe it could happen at his age**, so he is struck mute – unable to say a word.

Once again God breaks in by angelic ways, which is personal and gets the reaction – Zechariah is terrified but forced to accept. And once again, what might have been normal has to be directed by God to his purpose. **It wouldn't have happened that way otherwise.**

Onwards we go in the nativity story, to Joseph.

‘Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child. Being a righteous man, Joseph was unwilling to expose her to **public disgrace**, so planning to send her away. But **an angel of the Lord appeared to him** in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’

The reaction and the angel here are the other way around. Joseph was set on a course of action – to break-off the engagement with Mary and send her away. I'm sure he was very upset. So, God acts through his messenger, to steer the situation for his great purpose. Joseph will marry Mary. **But, it wouldn't have happened that way otherwise.**

Back to John the Baptist

We then have the sometimes-overlooked story of the naming of John the Baptist. According to the law, that would have been on the eighth day after his birth, as it shall be later with Jesus.

‘On the eighth day they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, ‘No; he is to be called John.’ They said to her, ‘But none of your relatives has this name.’ They looked to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. Zechariah asked for a writing-tablet (remember he is still mute) and wrote, ‘His name is John.’ Then all of them were amazed. **Immediately his mouth was opened** and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, **praising God.**’

This John is not to be ‘the normal’, he will not be one to follow expectation or to be named in accordance with custom. Later John would depart into the desert and call people out to hear his news of God’s promised Son who was coming now, and so repent. God had special plans for this child called John. **It wouldn’t have happened that way otherwise.**

Now into the fields to find The Shepherds.

Later in that Bethlehem stable, Mary and Joseph receive newborn baby Jesus: ‘**In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.** But the angel said to them, ‘**Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.**’

It’s similar, isn’t it? The word of the Lord comes to the lowly, and in great fear, yet they go - to be first to see the child, even though they are the bottom of society, mere shepherds. As it will turn out, this child shall become the Good Shepherd of us all. **But, it wouldn’t have happened that way otherwise.**

The Magi

But we are not done yet. Matthew tells us of the visit of the Magi – those wise men. ‘In the time of King Herod, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? **For we observed his star** at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ So off they go to find Jesus. ‘When they saw that the star had stopped, they were **overwhelmed with joy**. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

It wasn’t an angel this time, but a star. That was where these astrologers were normally looking, so that is where God places his sign. It’s a big reaction – they see and they set out, eventually to be overwhelmed with joy. The Magi are not always thought of as part of the nativity, but you try telling that to a child. They may not have been Kings, but I like the idea of them being kings because they show a greater reaction than terrible King Herod.

So, we come to the final part, and Jospeh comes back into the scene.

‘Now after they had left, **an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph** in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ **Then Joseph did get up**, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt. Herod would do a terrible thing against all new-born boys.

The Slaughter of the Innocents, by the order of Herod, is a shocking outcome from a glorious nativity. The divine arrival of John and Jesus, from a gracious God, is compared to the narcissism of human at its worst.

The good man of Jospheh needs no persuasion, his rection is immediate. By this time the holy family have seen so much of God's hand reaching into their lives. Jesus will live, but as you can now expect me to say: **It wouldn't have happened that way otherwise.**

The way I read the Nativity is to find that **seven times** there is miraculous intervention, to make the nativity *totally* an action of God. There is no question of there being a spurious once-off miracle to debate if it really happened. The Nativity is a great pile of divine gifts for a total Christmas.

There are sevens of things all across the Bible. Seven is the number of **completion** for things done by God and blessed by him (think of the creation). I'm sure you know what it means to take an oath, to take a vow before God. It's the sort of thing we do in baptism and marriage, and other times in our lives. In the Hebrew language, the number seven is *sheva*, which is very similar to the word *oath*, a thing completed in which God is said to be eternally present – for life.

By the way, if you are wondering why John the Baptist had to be called John, and not Zechariah, then take the Hebrew meaning of 'John' which is *Jehovah is gracious*. Indeed, God is gracious, just as he enters into the wreckage of humanity to bring a greater hope than we can provide for ourselves, **and which we so often do not deserve.**

Yes, the Nativity is all familiar and our Christmas customs are all lovely and traditional. But don't fail to see how many times what we expect as normal, might not have happen at all. Something wonderful is given to us. God breaks in to ensure it, **and it wouldn't have happened that way otherwise.** Amen