

World turned upside down in a few unexplainable minutes. Heavenly message from a heavenly messenger. Virginal conception. New life growing in the womb of a teenage girl possibly unaware the promised pregnancy has begun. Matthew describes the conception of Jesus in this way, *'This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.'* **Matthew 1:18** The surprising Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, at work. Mary's life now one of danger, challenge. Betrothal at risk. Reputation shredded. Unexpected news of her elderly relative's miraculous pregnancy swirling around in her head. Mind full of questions. Is Elizabeth really pregnant? Could I be pregnant too? What will it feel like to carry a child? Who is this baby growing inside me? Her heart gripped with uncertainty, expectation, a touch of fear. *'At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea,'* **v39** Wasting no time after the angel left her Mary heads off alone on a three day journey. The continuing story of God's revealing of Jesus. A divine story. A human story. People like us. Part of God's purposes for his world. Brothers and sisters, don't approach the gospels blind to the life dramas taking place. Their stories are our stories. Lives touched by the surprising Spirit. Bringing salvation, healing, hope, restoration, forgiveness, grace, love in the midst of pain, sin, regret, hurt, brokenness. Let me pray that the surprising Spirit will do that in our lives today. (pray here) Mary arrives at the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Staying for three Spirit shaped months. The Spirit revealing Jesus and growing God's people. *'Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.'* **v56** Mary greets the obviously pregnant Elizabeth. Confirming the truth spoken by the angel of God. Then the surprising Spirit surprises. The unborn son in Elizabeth's womb the first to respond. Not to Mary, to the presence of the unborn baby Jesus. *'When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb,'* **v41a** In **v44**, Elizabeth testifies the baby leaped for joy. The word used of a lamb leaping and frolicking in the field. A pregnant mum knows. This no baby kick but an unusual movement beyond all expectation. Baby John recognises baby Jesus. John's ministry pointing out Jesus begins three months before he was born. For **1:15** tells us, speaking of John, *'he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born.'* Years later John speaks of the fulfilment of his prenatal leap for joy. *'The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and*

is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.' **John 3:29**

Elizabeth also responds. The surprising Spirit filling Elizabeth so she speaks words of divine origin. Affirming what no one else apart from Mary could possibly know. Mary, pregnant. Bearing the Son of God, the long promised Messiah. *'In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"* **v42-43,45**

Confirming the angel's words to Mary. Affirming Mary's obedience to God's never failing word. What an encouragement for Mary to hear these words. We can safely speculate. Over the next three months Mary is encouraged, nurtured, prepared for the unique, joyous, troublesome and heartbreaking years ahead. God caring for Mary with his gift of the fellowship of believers. Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary, a small community of faith spending many Spirit shaped hours together. Zechariah's verbal contribution limited by his inability to speak. **1:20** Sisters and brothers, the surprising Spirit of God speaks through the surprising word of God. Speaking to our hearts, minds, wills, conscience. To bring healing. Restoring God's image in us. Most profoundly through reconciliation with God by the forgiveness of sin. The surprising events of this passage speak to our lives. Teaching the personhood of the unborn. The unborn John experiences emotion having the capacity to be filled with the Holy Spirit. A living person growing in Elizabeth's womb. Growing in Mary's womb. Deserving respect, care, protection, love. The range of emotions, experiences, decisions linked with every aspect of child bearing, including abortion, difficult to speak about and confront. A man speaking about them maybe even more confronting. Yet men not untouched by them. In my own immediate and wider family infertility, miscarriage, medical termination, surprise pregnancy, the experience of people I love. None of us left untouched by these matters. For some the impact deeply personal and life changing. Jesus knows the vulnerability of life in the womb. God the Father loves all people especially the weak and vulnerable. Christians have something loving and powerful to say in defence of the defenceless; when abortion reflects indifference to the personhood of the unborn. Christians ought to offer love, grace, compassion to those facing agonising decisions about abortion. If guilt and grief grip the lives of those affected it is the Jesus growing in Mary's womb who is the source of forgiveness, grace, love for those burdened and heavy laden. If my words open wounds or the surprising Spirit touches your heart please seek out one of the

Ministry Team or a Christian friend, ask for prayer after the service in the chapel or in private conversation. The events of this passage also speak about God's gift of the community of faith. A precious gift for Mary. For us. No community of faith is perfect. Yet the local church the instrument by which the surprising Spirit transforms lives. How often do you give thanks to God for the Christian community to which you belong? Where in the life of that community do you give others the opportunity to nurture you, love you, be agents of the surprising Spirit? How much of our together time is lost to opportunities for growth because of small talk instead of God talk, superficial exchanges instead of mutual sharing about the realities of life and faith? Let's listen to one another more. For the surprising Spirit speaking through our sisters and brothers. Let's intentionally look out for one another. For opportunities to be the means by which the surprising Spirit speaks God's words. In today's reading the surprising Spirit speaks to reveal Jesus through the unlikely; an unborn child and an elderly woman. Who are the unlikely people the surprising Spirit wants to use in your life? Maybe brothers or sisters you have consciously or unconsciously dismissed as vessels of the surprising Spirit. Their vulnerability, brokenness, frailty, weakness rendering them unsuitable in your eyes. What grace you may be missing out on by failing to share fellowship with them. There are times in my life, to my shame, Spirit inspired gems have flowed to me from fellow Christians I had dismissed as possible sources of God's grace and love. If you are proud like me, repent. If you feel weak, vulnerable, fragile in your faith. Unlikely vessels of grace. Be ready. The surprising Spirit desires to use you in the nurture and growth of others. Brothers and sisters listen to the surprising Spirit. Resolve to engage with each other. Sharing our testimony of the surprising Spirit's work in our lives. Receiving the testimony of others. Making room for greater revelations of Jesus character, healing and grace. Being part of a community of faith in which the surprising Spirit transforms lives.