

“Horns” // Luke 1:10–18; 68–72 // *Everlasting Wonder*, December 2023¹

Announcement

Well, I have good news which will remind you of what you think is bad news, but that will lead to more good news. The first good news: within literally minutes, all our services for Christmas at DPAC were sold out. You say, “Well, that’s bad news for me; I didn’t get a ticket.” But that leads me to the more good news: if you didn’t get the tickets you need, check back throughout the next couple of weeks, because more *will* become available--both because people turn them back in and because we have a few more for each service that we’re making available. If you’ll visit christmasatdpac.com, chances are you’ll get the tickets you are looking for. And if, when you visit there aren’t any left, check back the next day. **You can also check your campus’ Facebook page and connect with someone looking to transfer their tickets.**

Which leads to a request: If you went on and got the maximum # of tickets--you were praying in faith that all 15 of your cousins and your mailman and your butcher would all come with you... and, it turns out some of them can’t, PLEASE turn back in whatever tickets you won’t be using. Here’s why: Right now, if you need a ticket, or know someone who needs one, would you raise your hand? That’s why. Your holding onto that ticket keeps it from someone who needs it. So, do the right thing--ok?

¹ Works Consulted: *God of All Things*, Andrew Wilson; *Revell Bible Dictionary*; *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*; *King’s Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of*

(2) There are a number of other things happening this season--like our Summit en Español Christmas service which takes place next Sunday, December 17, at 12:45pm at the Blue Ridge Campus where it normally meets. 11% of our community is Hispanic, and for many of us, our paths intersect with many of these men and women throughout the week. So, invite them!

Introduction

OK, Luke 1 if you have your Bibles... This officially begins our Christmas series so I guess I can say to you, officially, Merry Christmas. Every year there is a debate about whether we should be allowed to play Christmas music before Thanksgiving. And clearly the answer is no, it should be against the law, punishable by fines and imprisonment and the plagues of the apocalypse. If you elect me czar of the world, that will be one of my first acts.

But I get it--some Christmas music is great and you can’t wait to listen to it and you shouldn’t have only 4 weeks to do it in. I get that. But can we at least acknowledge that some Christmas music is just really, really bad? Not all of it, of course--I mean, the old hymns are great, Summit’s new Christmas Worship album is awesome--but some Christmas music is just appalling. I mean, I agree with my friend Kevin DeYoung: 80% of the songs they play over the speakers at the mall are just dreadful. And the industrial music complex seems committed to cranking out at least a dozen or so new disasters each Christmas season from their dismal assembly line of woe.

Jesus; Kevin DeYoung, “The Song of Zechariah,” preached at Christ Covenant Church, December 15, 2019; Alistair Begg. And others as noted throughout.

I asked my kids what the best and worst Christmas songs were, and for the worst, here's what we came up with:

- "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" (which just seems confusing for children)
- And then there's, "Santa, Baby" (I mean, when I hear that song, I question whether or not there's a future for the human race. You say, "But I like it." Well, I don't know what to say: you have bad judgment; they probably like unfrosted pop tarts, too, I don't know what to tell you)
- "Baby, it's cold outside," which, honestly, sounds like social services might need to be called;
- And then, "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" (I should note that this one went on our best and our worst list).
- And then, "The Christmas Song" by Alvin and the Chipmunks--I admit here, too, I enjoy the first 20 seconds of this song the first time I hear it each season, but then it quickly starts to give me that feeling like I have when I see someone try to open a bottle of coke with their teeth and I'm like "Lord, make it stop."²

I say all this tongue and cheek, of course, but mostly I wanted to make the point that Christmas has always been associated with songs, and for good reason: there's **lots of songs in the original Christmas story**. At least two biblical characters composed songs in response to the first Christmas: one was Mary--traditionally her song is called "The Magnificat;" the other is Zechariah, and his song is traditionally called "The Benedictus."

Well, this weekend, we're going to look at Zechariah's song--not the whole song, but one image that Zechariah uses at the beginning of that song to shape the rest of it. You may have read this song a dozen times, but I'm gonna bet you read right over this word and didn't stop to think about its significance.

(And let me acknowledge a source as I begin: Earlier this year I read a book by a new favorite author, **Andrew Wilson**, called *God of All Things*. Andrew takes 30 *ordinary, everyday objects* that the Bible uses to teach us about God and his work in the world. We're going to use 3 of those objects over the next 3 weeks to talk about Christmas-- 3 objects that the Bible associates with Christmas that will help you grasp its meaning. **The first one is the first verse of Zechariah's song.**)

Real quick, in case you don't know: Zechariah wrote this song upon the miraculous birth of his son, John the Baptist, given to him and his wife Elisabeth in their extreme old age. Zechariah and his wife had always wanted a baby, but they'd never been able to have one, and when God surprised them with one in their extreme old age, Zechariah exclaims, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people [69] and has raised up a **HORN** of salvation for us in the house of his servant David..."

Now, lots of couples throughout history have prayed for a baby, and when God granted their request, many expressed thanksgiving, and some even did it through a song, but I daresay none of them did so by comparing the birth of their baby to a horn. Why is that the first image Zechariah goes to?

² This opening inspired by Kevin DeYoung in his message on Luke 1

Great question, and these are the kinds of questions you should be asking when you read the Bible—and to answer it, we have to delve a little bit more into the backstory of this story. Because when the Bible presents something odd, usually it answers that question in *another* part of the Bible.

Zechariah was one of the high priests of Israel, and he had been selected to go in and offer incense in the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctuary where the presence of God dwelled in Israel. This was a big deal for Zechariah. You see, you could only be selected once in your entire lifetime to do this—and there were thousands of priests, so most of them never got to go into the Holy of Holies *at all*.³

It was a big deal, and it required days of preparation. For the week leading up to this, you had to go into a kind of seclusion from your family, just to make sure you didn't interact with anyone or anything that would make you unclean. The night before entering the temple, you would stay up all night praying, preparing your soul, and *other* priests would stay up with you to make sure you didn't accidentally go to sleep. Then you would put on a special outfit—a robe of spotless, bright white linen, and you'd go on.

While you were inside, people in the congregation would stand outside praying for you. You see, the Law said that if impurity was found in you in the holy of holies, you could be struck down immediately. In fact, legend says that they would put a rope around

³ In *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Group, 2011), 79–80. For more on this, see Jacob Milgrom, Leviticus 1–16, *The Anchor Bible*, 1015–16. Milgrom draws his conclusions from the Mishnah that

the foot of the priest in case he got struck down, so they could drag you out, because how else could they get you out? That may be just a legend, but it illustrates the seriousness of what Zechariah was doing.

[10] And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. [11] And (while Zechariah is in there), there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. [12] And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. [13] But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah...” (BTW, we have this image of angels as dainty, wispy, fairy-looking beings, or, even worse, chubby babies with wings and nerf bows and arrows... but whenever someone saw an angel in the Bible, they were terrified. We know that because every time an angel appears their first words are, “Don't die!”)

“Don't be afraid, Zechariah,” the angel says, [13]...for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. [14] And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, [15] for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. [16] And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, [17] 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.”

expands on Yom Kippur with most detail, the Yoma. The Yoma includes details such as appointing a back-up priest in case the first is unfit, “dry runs” in which the priest practices the motions of pouring the blood, and the specific order of body parts to bathe.

This is a prophecy about the birth of John the Baptist, who will prepare the way of the Messiah, preaching repentance and faith toward God. The problem with this prophecy, for Zechariah, is that he and his wife are old-- like octogenarian-old; like, his social security number was 12, old. In fact, when the angel says, "Zechariah, your prayer has been heard," I've got to wonder, "When was the last time Zechariah had prayed that prayer?" It had probably been 40 years since Zecharian prayed that prayer!

And Zechariah thinks, "I don't even know what you're talking about. This sounds like crazy talk," so he said to the angel, [18] **"How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years."** ("That ship has sailed, God! I don't think I'm up to the task, and she's definitely not. And I wouldn't even be sure how to broach this conversation with her. You think at dinner tonight I'm just gonna to say, "Honey, you ain't gonna believe what happened in the Holy of Holies today," then we're just going to skip back to the bedroom and make a baby?")

[19] **And the angel answered him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. [20] And behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time."**

And so, for the next 9 months, Zechariah is mute, unable to say a single word. Anytime he wants to say something he has to get a little chalkboard or parchment and write out what he wants to say. (BTW, there are a handful of details in the Bible that lead us to believe Zechariah was not only rendered mute, but deaf, too.)

Maybe Zechariah's punishment strikes you as a little harsh. After all, his question sounded like an honest one. *"How shall I know this? For I am an old man..."* And plus, right after this story, when the same angel, Gabriel, appears to Mary and tells her that she's gonna have a miraculous birth, she asks a nearly identical question to Zechariah's. **Look at vs. 34: "And Mary said to the angel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?'"** But the angel doesn't rebuke or punish her. He patiently explains how it's all going to work. So why be so hard on ol' Zach?

This is one of those times where the written word doesn't communicate tone. Mary's "How can this be?" was expressed as a kind of wonder, whereas Zechariah's "How can I know this" was the "how" of incredulity and unbelief.

Mary immediately followed up her question with, "Be it unto me according to your word." IOW, "This is amazing, and I receive it." Zechariah's response was, "How can this be? I don't believe it."

So Zechariah was rendered mute for 9 months (9 mos and 8 days to be exact, up to the date of the baby's circumcision, which happened 8 days after birth).

Zechariah is in a place of total quiet for 9 months, which had to be brutal. Have you ever heard of the 'anechoic chamber'? It's a small, unlit chamber at Orfield Laboratories in Minneapolis that holds the Guinness World Record for the world's quietest place. It's underground; it has double walls of insulated steel and 1 foot-thick concrete outside of that, and inside it has 3.3 foot-thick fiberglass acoustic wedges. Believe it or not, no one has ever been able to sit in

it for longer than 45 minutes. It's so quiet, your ears adjust and you start to hear things like your heart beating, your lungs working, your stomach gurgling. In the anechoic chamber, you become the sound. People start to hallucinate. Zechariah is in virtual silence for 9 months.

And the baby is born and they come to the circumcision ceremony (and, btw, if you don't know what a circumcision ceremony is, your campus pastors are on hand immediately afterward to explain it in great detail to you). But that's where they would formally name the baby, and Zechariah is asked what they want to name the baby—which is basically just a formality, because you'd almost always name their firstborn son after the father, or if not him, the father's father. Well, when they ask Zechariah what he wants to name the baby, he takes out his little chalkboard and writes out "John," which is, of course, what the angel had commanded.

So they're all confused, because nobody in Zechariah's family was named John, and they were like, "Zechariah, you can't do that! Your name is not John, and nobody in your family is named John," but Zechariah is like "(Shakes head/points to chalkboard)" and they are like, "OK, that's weird but whatever you want" ... and God considers this act of Zechariah's as his having passed the test, and immediately Zechariah's tongue is loosed and he begins to bless God with this song: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David... (Luke 1:68–69) Which I guess he's been composing in his head for 9 months because he just belts it out. This is like a musical, he just bursts into song.

But again I ask, Why would "horn" be the first image he goes to? It literally is the first thing that comes out of his mouth. Why?

Horns in the Bible indicate four things:

(1) Horns: a sign of strength—Horns (**EXAMPLE**) on an animal were for fighting and protection. They were a sign of strength. Battles between horned animals were often fierce.

- We still use this imagery today. Several professional teams use horns in their logos: rams, buffaloes, bulls.
 - (Though, I should hasten to add that teams represented by horns or horned animals have a dismal Super Bowl record (1–10 by my count), so I'm not sure we should see it as a good luck charm.)
 - **For us here locally, both the Tar Heels and Blue Devils (PIC) feature horns on their mascots.**
- The Psalms often talk about God raising up a horn for his people, and that meant that they trusted God to fight for them and protect them.

(2) Horns: a symbol of abundance—In the ancient world, horns represented fertility and prosperity. The cornucopia (**PIC**) was fashioned after a horn, with fruit and bread flowing out of it to symbolize prosperity.⁴

⁴ There is no explicit reference in Scripture to a horn of plenty, but something similar may be the basket of firstfruits given by Israel as an offering, or the basket of summer fruits seen by Amos (Amos 8:1–2).

(3) Horns: a ceremonial instrument of anointing—in ancient Israel, when it was time to choose a new king, a prophet would take the horn of one of these mighty animals—usually a ram—and fill it with oil and pour that oil over the new king’s head.

(4) Horns: the siren for announcement—Horns in Israel were used as trumpets. And I know you really want me to demonstrate that and I tried to practice, but they must have some secret that hasn’t been passed down because the sound it makes sounds stupid. The trumpet version of this horn was called the *shophar*--and it was used to [summon Israel to arms](#) or to initiate battle.⁵ They also used it to announce the beginning of special holidays like Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and Rosh HaSHAnah (the Jewish New Year), and a horn blast also signaled the start to every Sabbath.⁶

So, horns represented **strength, abundance, anointing, and announcement**. So now, we’re better prepared to see why Zechariah’s first words of praise about this new pair of babies to be born--both his and Elisabeth’s, as well as the virgin Mary’s--are about a “horn.”

You see, the baby they were pointing to, was:

(1) Jesus, the horn of God’s strength

- The little baby born to Mary was God’s strength. And that was hard for them to grasp. I mean, how could a little baby, a little helpless baby born to an unwed mother in poverty, be the

epitome of God’s strength? All of Israel was waiting for the Messiah to come, but they all assumed he would come riding on a horse with splendor and riches and—most of all—followed by an army. In fact, just a few generations before Jesus. A man named Judas Maccabeus who had led a revolt to free Israel from foreign oppression. People thought he might be the Messiah. He was a mighty warrior; “Maccabeus” literally means “hammer.” He led a band of warriors from town to town, fighting foreign oppressors and liberating Jewish towns. And guess what he blew as he started his attack? The shofar. *That’s* the kind of Messiah the people of Israel were expecting. Not a little, helpless baby born into poverty, lying in a manger.

- But this little helpless baby would have power. He’d have power to open blind eyes. To multiply bread and fish. To command demons to flee. To walk on water. To heal all manner of sickness. To speak to raging hurricanes and immediately have them dissipate. To raise the dead. To do something that all humans since the dawn of time have wanted to do--after going into the grave to walk out by their own power.
- Jesus had power--and yet, one of the great mysteries of his life was why he so often hid his power. His disciples couldn’t understand it. He was selective about where he used his power, and often told people whom he healed, “Don’t publicize this.” (This is one of the things I love about *The Chosen*, they really bring this out. Jesus was always hiding his power.)
- And people then were confused by it just like they are now. His followers were like, “Listen, Jesus, if you have the power, use it!”

⁵ Judges 6:34; Jeremiah 4:19–21

⁶ BTW, the person who blows the shofar is called, in Hebrew, “ba’al tekiah”—literally, the “master of the blast.” What a cool job title. “What do you do?” “I’m the master of the blast. The master blaster.”

“If God really loves us like you say he does, why not use your power at all times, in all places, to fix everything?” People in Jesus’ day were just as confused as to why he didn’t do more as we are to why he doesn’t answer seemingly legitimate prayers.

- But see, Jesus knew human nature, and he knew the moment he dangled in front of us healing from all sickness or power over nature or the power to create food from nothing, we’d focus on that and miss his most important message--that we needed to be restored *TO GOD*.
- You see, our main problem was not sickness or poverty or oppression or even death; our main problem is that our sin had separated from God, and a Messiah that could restore to us all those other things--who could heal our bodies and deliver us from all our enemies or make us wealthy--if that Messiah didn’t fix our sin problem, we would still be lost.
- This is, believe it or not, one of the themes of *The Pirates of the Caribbean* movie. The pirates live on eternally, but as dead men, and it’s a curse, not a blessing. I’m not saying *Pirates of the Caribbean* is a Christian movie, but the point they are making is a Christian point. To have all our needs taken care of and not be restored to God means we would live as dead men, and that would ultimately be a curse, not a blessing.
- So Jesus, who was this horn of God’s power, often hid that power, so that he could save us at the point of our brokenness. And having done that, to resurrect from the dead and offer that to all who would receive him.

⁷ Wilson, 43.

(2) Jesus, the horn of God’s abundance

- Jesus was the bread of life. He said that those who feasted on him would never hunger. He was the fountain of living water, and he said that those who drank from him would never thirst.
- This was illustrated most powerfully through his feeding of the 5000. He took 5 loaves and 2 fish and multiplied it so that not only was there enough for the 5000, they took up 12 baskets of leftovers. This miracle was not primarily about God’s promises to multiply what we give him and give it back to us; it is primarily about the all-satisfying, abundant provision of Jesus’ presence for our deepest soul needs. Jesus, the horn of God’s abundance.

(3) Jesus, God’s anointed one

- The Hebrew word for “anointing” was “mashach,” from which we get the word “Messiah.” The Messiah means the one anointed by God with the oil from his horn of power and abundance.⁷
- The Greek translation “*mashach*” is “Christ.” Jesus Christ. (Christ, you know, is not Jesus’ last name. It’s his title. When we say “Jesus Christ,” we are saying, “Jesus, the anointed one, the one in whom all the riches of God’s fullness are found, the one on whom God has poured out his Spirit.”⁸

(4) Jesus, God’s announcement of salvation

- These babies were an announcement. God was sounding the horn! The battle was beginning. The day of atonement was here. The New Year of God’s restoration had begun.

⁸ Andrew Wilson says: “Jesus is the one over whom the horn of God’s strength has been lifted high, in whom the riches of God’s fullness are found, and upon whom the oil of God’s Spirit has been poured.”

- Maybe the most important thing to know about the gospel is that it is first and foremost an announcement. The gospel, we say, is not primarily instructions about how you're supposed to live (it has implications for that, for sure, but that's not primarily what it is). The gospel is primarily an announcement about what God has done.
- **The gospel is not good advice, we say, it's good news.** That's literally what the word means, "good news," and today we associate the word "gospel" with religious things, but in those days the word wasn't religious at all. It was used, for example, when an emperor or a general won a great battle. The emperor would send heralds throughout the country with a "gospel" of his victory. The herald (the evangelist) would proclaim: "I have good news! Our emperor has won a great battle for us—you no longer need to live in fear; he has won the victory!"
- Bible writers commandeered that word to encapsulate what Jesus had done. God won a victory for us. We no longer need to live in fear—he has won the victory. The horn was sounding--the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) was here, and the New Year of God's new creation (*Rosh Hashanah*) had begun.

This is what Zechariah was saying. Which brings me back to him. Think of the irony of what Zechariah says: "God has raised up a horn." Horns make a sound, and making sounds is exactly what Zechariah has *NOT* been able to do for 9 months and 8 days now!

⁹ Granted, this wasn't a rule laid out in the Torah (as with some other exclusions), but it was one mentioned in the Mishnah. Since Zechariah himself may have been deaf as well as mute—check out John's birth story, how they are waving at him to get him to respond—it's likely he was not

Be honest: Have you ever read this story of Zechariah and thought, *"I love this story; but Zechariah's punishment seems kind of bizarre... I mean, why not make him walk with a limp, or give him boils, or write a big scarlet 'D' on his forehead (for 'doubter'). But why bind him up in silence so that he cannot speak?"*

But see, there's rich symbolism at work. Think about it: Who was this miraculous child that would be born to Zechariah and Elisabeth? John the Baptist. And what role would he play? He would be THE VOICE crying in the wilderness, the herald announcing that God's Savior had come into the world.

And so we see Zechariah's punishment was not random at all. It was, in fact, poetically and prophetically perfect. Zechariah's voice had been away until the voice crying in the wilderness had arrived, who would announce the coming of God's ultimate Voice, God's Word made flesh, JESUS.

And now, Zechariah has a second chance to heed that voice. It's been a rough year for Zechariah. You see, the Law said that deaf and mute people couldn't go into the Temple. And Zechariah's a priest! So not only has he been unable to speak (and probably hear), he's also not been able to go into the Temple for nearly a year.⁹

Zechariah's speechlessness and banishment was also supposed to represent God's silence in Israel. For 400 years there had been no

allowed to offer "terumah," that is, priestly offerings.
<https://www.talmudology.com/jeremybrownmdgmailcom/2018/11/7/menachot-93a-intelligence-and-the-hard-of-hearing>;
<https://www.sefaria.org/topics/deaf-mute?sort=Relevance&tab=sources>

word from God in Israel, and this silence was, in part, because of Israel's unbelief and exile, which was just like Zechariah's muteness and banishment.

But now, with the birth of this baby, God was speaking again, and Zechariah was being given a second chance, and Israel was being given a second chance.

And, hear me, you and I are being given a second chance, too.¹⁰ Maybe for years you have lived in unbelief like Zechariah's. "God, how could these things be? You thought God had given up on you, and you've given up on him. And you've asked, God, how could you really love me and allow this or that to happen to me?" And you've lived distant from him. Maybe you've felt cut off.

Jesus is God's horn of announcement to you. Jesus. And maybe he hasn't answered all of your questions. All of Zechariah's questions weren't answered, either. But God sent a baby, and said, "Believe because of him." You say, "Well, maybe if God made my grandparents get pregnant with a baby in their 80's, I'd believe, too." But God has given us a miracle even greater than that--the Resurrection. The greatest miracle was not a baby born to a couple in their old age, or even one born to a virgin; it was a man who stepped onto the scene fulfilling 1200 years of prophecy, was crucified according to prophecy, put into a grave, and walked out of that grave in his own power 3 days later.

God's answer to all our questions of doubt is the birth of Jesus. The late Tim Keller used to say, "You pride yourselves on being a skeptical person and doubting everything. Great," he says. "Have you ever considered doubting your doubts?" (Maybe your doubts aren't the definitive refutation of belief you think they are. You see, if the resurrection is true, it means your doubts and questions have answers, even if you don't know what they are, yet. The problem is not that you are skeptical, it's that you're not skeptical of the right things.) The miraculous birth and resurrection of Jesus is a reason to doubt your doubts. Jesus is God's answer to your questions right now and he invites you, in light of who he is, and how he came, what he did, to doubt your doubts.

Which leads me to the last couple of things I want to point out:

Jesus, not the horn they were expecting...

Let's be honest, this "horn" of power and abundance was not what they were expecting. As I said, they were looking for a military deliverer, and instead, they got a baby born in weakness, whose life was spent in poverty.

I mean, the whole situation was confusing. Of all the parents God could have chosen to send his Messiah through, why choose the poorest of the poor? We know that Mary and Joseph were the poorest of the poor, because when it came time for them to make an offering of thanksgiving at the Temple, instead of offering a lamb as

¹⁰ Much thanks to Kevin DeYoung whose thoughts I have followed here the above paragraphs.

the Law required, they offered a couple of doves, which was a provision in the Law for the exceptionally poor.

God sent his horn of salvation, his anointed Messiah, to poor parents, and not only that, he sent his Messiah to morally scandalized parents. Have you ever thought about the situation that God put Mary and Joseph through? Poor Mary is an unmarried teenager, probably 13 or 14--who shows up unexplainably pregnant. In those days, that was grounds of ostracism from the community. (Everybody was whispering, *"Can you believe that stuff about Mary... I mean, where ARE her parents? How could they let this happen?"*) And poor Joseph, here's his dilemma: if he doesn't publicly renounce her, and he stays with her, then everyone will assume that he did it, and that will ruin his reputation, his business prospects, really, his whole life; but on the other hand, if he tells everyone the truth that the baby is miraculously conceived by God, everyone will assume he was lying! Oh right, Joseph, sure... "God did it." I mean, what would we say to a teenager today who got pregnant, or his girlfriend got pregnant, and claimed God had done it?

Why would God do it this way? God deliberately set up the holy birth as a moral scandal! (One of the reasons he did it that way, btw, is because he was saying to all of you who have been falsely accused, I SEE YOU. I identify with you. I'm coming for you.)

But suffice it to say, Jesus was not the horn of salvation they were expecting.

Jesus, not the horn they were expecting, but Jesus, the horn they (and we) need.

Though he was not what they were expecting, he is what they needed. You see, what we most needed in a Savior was someone who could restore us to God. Someone who could take away our sins. And so God's horn of salvation didn't come exercising power against sin, because that would have destroyed us. Rather, he surrendered that power so he could die the death we'd been condemned to die and release us from sin's curse. Which leads me to another place we see horns in the Bible.

Gen 22: Abraham is on his way up Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac, his son. At the last minute God shows him a ram caught in a thicket that he wants Abraham to use in place of his son? Do you remember what that ram was caught by? His horns. The ram was caught by his horns, which meant he couldn't use them. And because of that, Abraham took that ram, and offered him on the altar in the place of his son. The ram died, and Isaac walked free.

Because Jesus came as a lamb, and not as a mighty ram, because he didn't use his horns, he could die in our place so that we, like Isaac, could go free. Jesus, the horn of God's salvation, surrendered his power so that he could die in our place, because the Savior we most needed was one who could bear our sin and restore us to God.

Yes, you might have a list of things you want God to do, and God is not insensitive to those. He's a God who answers prayer, and he invites you to bring those things to him. But what you and I most need is restoration to God.

I told you at the beginning that lots of couples over the years have prayed to God for a baby and when God answered, many had expressed their joy with thanksgiving and sometimes even songs, but none of them compared the birth of their baby to the raising up of a horn.

Well, that's not entirely true. Zechariah's song is actually modeled after the song Hannah wrote in 1 Samuel 2 after the miraculous birth of her child. Hannah also had been a childless woman who felt unwanted and unloved by her husband (it's hard enough to not be able to have a child today, but in those days it was considered a sign of being forsaken by God), and so Hannah prayed to God for a child and God answered. And in response she, too, wrote a song. And, watch this, just like Zechariah, her first line in that song is, "My heart exults in the LORD; my horn is exalted in the LORD." (1 Samuel 2:1)

In his song, Zechariah is deliberately quoting Hannah (and several more things in his song follow hers). And what was the horn they were celebrating? Are they talking about their specific babies? No. Both Zechariah's baby and Hannah's baby had a special connection to Jesus.

- Samuel, who was born to Hannah, would be the prophet who would anoint David as King from a sacred horn of oil, David whose throne the Messiah would sit on. Samuel also would be born in a time when there had been silence from God, 1 Samuel 3:1 says that the word of God was rare in those days.
- And John the Baptist, who was born to Zechariah and Elisabeth, would after 400 years of silence, announce the Messiah's coming.

Jesus was the "horn" they both pointed to. And that's good news for all of us who feel like we are barren, too. Jesus is God's answer to that. Listen: lots of people throughout Christian history have prayed for a child and God didn't grant them one. Some of you have prayed to get pregnant, and God has not granted it yet. Or you've prayed to get married, or to get a job, or to get a raise, or to be healed. And so far, God has not done as you've asked, and you feel barren--and I'm not trying to make light of those things, they can be difficult, but God gives you something even greater than health or a child or marriage. He gives you Jesus, the horn of his power and provision, who not only restores us to God, but promises to one day make all the sad things in our life come untrue. He who spared not his own son for us, but gave him up for us, Scripture says, how will he not along with him freely give us all things? This short life, Paul says, which is full of barrenness and disappointments and tears, will one day be swallowed up in eternity where every prayer will be answered, every tear wiped away, and every hope will be fulfilled. All God's promises, Paul says, are yes to us in Christ Jesus. Your life may feel broken and incomplete here on earth, but it will be fully restored to abundance in eternity, and in the meantime you get Jesus, whose presence is better than fathers or mothers or houses or lands or husbands or kids.

VAMP

*I love the old hymn: I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold
I'd rather be His than have riches untold
I'd rather have Jesus than houses or lands
I'd rather be led by his nail-pierced hand
Than to be the king of a vast domain
And be held in sin's dread sway*

*I'd rather have Jesus than anything
This world affords today*

Jesus, maybe not the horn you were expecting, but he is for sure the horn that you need.

And that horn is offered to you today. Let me close with one final place we see horns in the Bible, one that I find breathtaking: the four corners of the altar at the center of the Temple were called “horns.” Leviticus gives us two purposes for those horns. The blood of sacrifices was sprinkled on them, and most interestingly, people running for their lives, looking for refuge, could run into the temple and grasp them and find forgiveness and safety from the avenger.¹¹ If you came to the Temple and grabbed a hold of these horns, the person pursuing you couldn't kill you. You could find mercy.

The thing you most need in a Savior is mercy. Which is why Zechariah says the purpose of this horn was [72] to show the mercy promised to our fathers...

Maybe you've made a mess of your life. Maybe you're sitting there thinking, “If these people knew the truth about me, they wouldn't even want me in here.” And maybe you're right. But you know what? These horns of mercy at the altar of Jesus' death are there for you, too... for you to come and grasp them right now. To receive mercy. To experience salvation. To take hold of Jesus, the horn of salvation offered to you.

There's healing at this altar. There's forgiveness. There's restoration. There's hope. Because Jesus, God's mighty horn, laid down his might and died for you. If you'll come and grasp them.

At the end of the day, my job is not to stand up here and dispense wisdom to you. It's not to give you practical steps to change your life. I stand up each week just to proclaim, to herald, a trumpet blast that tells you the horns of the altar are open for you.

Over the last few weeks, we've talked about spiritual warfare. These are the horns of deliverance, you can grasp right now to find refuge!

Invitation:

- Need to accept Christ? Grab the horns!
- Need his help and refuge right now? His promise that he will never leave or forsake you, that in your situation he will be your constant help and your refuge and never abandon you... come grab these horns right now!
 - “I can grab hold of them in my seat.” Yes, and the Israelites could just have prayed to God where they were, but God had them come to the Temple. There's something powerfully symbolic about coming and humbling yourself...

Stand and sing (as one congregation!) “O Come to the Altar.” This is our invitation to one another and to anyone who is listening--O, come to the altar!

¹¹ Lev 4:7; 1 Kings 1:50–53, *Revell Bible Dictionary*