

Blessed – part 4

Christmas Day – Luke 1:39-45

Luke 1:39-45 (NIV)

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

170 kilometres – 4-5 days

Some people in this world are simply blessed but they don't always see it, while other people are keenly aware that they have lived a fortunate life. Mark is one of those, although you wouldn't say he was beaten by the ugly stick, it has given him a few touches here and there. Despite that, he managed to convince the beautiful Kirsten to marry him. She was beautiful, inside and

out and it was love at first sight for Mark when they met in that second year tutorial, and for her, well, sometimes a man's persistence can pay big.

Mark loved his life, they lived in the house his parents had left him, it was ten minutes from the surf and his electrical contracting business was doing well. Rounding it all out were three lovely kids a dog a cat, three chooks and an SUV with a back window covered in stick figures. The only wrinkle, in this otherwise perfect life, was church. Kirsten was a committed Christian who loved going to church and the only time Mark had been to church was at his own wedding, the memory of which was a little bit blurry thanks to the contents of a hip flask his best man kept passing him.

While Mark and Kirsten genuinely adored each other, church became a bit of a sticky issue. Kirsten persuaded Mark to go to church a couple of times but he found it weird and then he began to discover a very long list of essential activities that could



only be done on Sundays. Like shampooing the toe bar, seeing his eyebrow specialist, waxing the lawn mower, and finding out why the number of tiles in the swimming pool kept changing. Of course Kirsten was no fool and over the years she had made a number of bargains with Mark, the latest being she would not go on about church if he would go to church with her once a year on Christmas day and that he would do his level best not to act like an astronaut in a flat earth meeting.

Mark had readily agreed to this arrangement without really considering how tough it was going to be. Things would be going ok until someone started talking about angels announcing things. When Mark heard things like that his arms would automatically rise and cross themselves in the universal sign indicating the butter has slipped off somebodys noodle. Then someone else would talk about virgins conceiving a child, who is the son of God, and at this point Mark would virtually spontaneously combust and despite all his best intentions, out of his mouth would come an audible involuntary groan that universally means, give me a break. It's at this point, Kirsten demonstrated her amazing super power to locate one of Marks tender floating ribs with the point of her elbow followed by a fierce look that promised all manner of dire consequences for a husband who failed to keep a simple promise.

After a few years of this fairly unsatisfactory arrangement Kirsten went to see her pastor and told the story of her husband's great unreasonableness and asked the pastor if he had any suggestions about ways she could force him to do the right thing, in love of course. To her surprise her pastor, supposedly a man of God, wasn't immediately on her side. She had hoped at the very least they would pray together for God to place some small plague on Mark, nothing life threatening, perhaps a painful boil on his bottom or something, something to teach him the errors of his ways. Instead the pastor had perversely seemed to take Marks side, suggesting that for people who didn't grow up in the faith, church is in fact a bit weird. This was not what she wanted to hear and seeing this the pastor opened his bible to Luke chapter 1: verse 39, and pointed to a journey that Mary had made when she was dealing with her own experience of weird. In verse 39, he read that after Mary had been told she was pregnant with God's son she **immediately** went on a 170 kilometre walk to talk with her best girlfriend, her cousin Elizabeth, who was also the wife of a priest and wise in spiritual matters. This was because Mary needed help, because at that point in her life it was just wall to wall weird. As Mary was making that four to five day journey she was probably thinking, what am I going to say to Elizabeth that doesn't sound crazy or blasphemous? So it was an incredible relief for Mary to discover that Elizabeth got it! That her cousin understood this thing that nobody should really be able to understand.

In a loud voice Elizabeth (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?" (Luke 2:42, 43)

“You see”; said the pastor; “God understands how difficult the journey from weird to wonder is and because God is so committed to having a relationship with all people, including your husband Mark, it is in his nature to prepare the way, to put the right people in the right place. This is part of God’s will, so when you pray that part of the Lord’s Prayer, that says “your kingdom come your will be done”, pray for Mark because God’s will is for him to move from weird to wonder. At this point the pastor paused because Kirsten was looking a little distressed and she confirmed this by bursting into tears; “but I have prayed for Mark” she wailed, “for years and years. I’ve fasted and prayed, I’ve believed and prayed, I collected hundreds of passages from the bible and I prayed, I have worn out eight prayer partners praying for Mark, and I even built a prayer closet in my sowing room. So what am I doing wrong?”

Any man that’s been married for a while knows that the; what am I doing wrong question is a trick question and any attempt to answer it is only asking for trouble, so the pastor subtly changed the subject. He said; “do you know how many years it was between the time when the Jewish prophets told the people about the Messiah and when the Messiah finally turned up?” Kirsten shook her head. It was 400 years, said the pastor, it’s was a long and difficult time waiting for the answer to that prayer. Sometimes we have to wait and sometimes that’s the hardest thing we will ever do. Unfortunately the pastor wasn’t exactly right, because waiting for the answer to that prayer was in fact not the hardest thing that Kirsten would ever do.

Six month later Mark and Kirsten were sitting in a doctor’s office trying to make sense of what the doctor was saying. Kirsten had been feeling tired and developed a painful swelling under one arm but the doctors words sounded ridiculous, impossible, there must have be some mistake - stage four melanoma with masses in the lung, liver and brain? Kirsten found herself in some kind of fog. The doctor gently suggested she put her affairs in order and distantly she mused that she’d never had an affair and then realised what he meant and then all she could think about was who would drop the kids off at school... Time went on and chemo took a terrible toll. Kirsten lost a lot of weight, a lot of hair, her skin became jaundiced, and she always felt sick, and more and more the incredible tiredness robbed her of precious time with her family.

After eight months of gruelling treatment there was a small improvement, but Kirsten was barely holding her own and Mark was beginning to think that the doctors may not be able to save her and they began to consider alternative therapies. As it happened, Kirsten’s church had a healing ministry, a team of people would pray for sick people every Saturday afternoon and Kirsten decided that was where she needed to be. To her surprise, Mark insisted on going with her, to support her. Yes, church is weird he affirmed, but prayer couldn’t hurt, could it?

For the next few months Kirsten and Mark went to the healing centre on those Saturdays when Kirsten was well enough to get out of bed. They would enter the quiet waiting area greeted by the flicker of scented candles and soothed by gentle piano music playing in the background. Mark was very surprised at how quickly the weird and unfamiliar experience of being prayed for became less and less weird. It actually became something that he began to look forward to. There was an energy there that they needed, it somehow balanced the sober news they were getting from the various doctors, and there was an atmosphere of love and tender concern that touched them both deeply and often had them sobbing in release as their fears were touched in prayer.

Sitting at the doctors a few months later, Mark had his first real surprise, the doctor's news was no improvement, but in that instant Mark realised that he had been expecting a different report. It was a bit of shock for him to discover that somewhere in his ordinary secular Aussie heart a little seed of faith had taken root and to tell you the truth he wasn't all that happy about it. Angrily he thought, didn't they have enough going on in their lives without the complications of false hope? So the next time Kirsten went to the healing centre Mark stayed home to paint one of the kid's rooms, at some point he accidentally tripped over a paint tin and punched a hole in the wall.

For the next few months Kirsten continued to attend the healing centre while Mark lived in the strangeness of being angry at a God he was pretty sure he didn't believe in. At the next specialist appointment the news was even worse, the masses in some areas were growing again. At the end of the consultation the specialist invited Kirsten and Mark to consider going on a trial program, a new drug with some incredible results in mice. The only trouble being, they wouldn't know if they were getting the drug or the placebo. A "what the hell do we have to lose" look flashed between them and they agreed to join the program.

If this story is becoming a little too heavy for Christmas day, be of good cheer. After only a few months on the program Kirsten's masses were in complete retreat and in a year and a half she was declared, not only in remission, but as far as they could tell, cancer free. Mark found himself back in church from time to time, but a little at a loss for words. He kind of wanted to say thanks, and he did, over and over and over again, to someone out there somewhere... Now if this wasn't a true story it would probably end with Mark becoming a Christian and the happy couple finally being on the same page in every dimension of their life. But it's a true story and Mark to this day still has many doubts and questions. He wouldn't call himself a Christian, but by the same token he's not the same man he was. Mark is still on a Journey somewhere between weird and wonder but he's in good company, people have been on that journey for thousands of years going back to an extraordinary woman called Mary who was up to her neck in weird but discovered that God could lead her into

wonder and as we finish this morning, I simply invite you to listen to what wonder sounded like in the heart of young woman called Mary.

Mary said: With all my heart I praise the Lord, and I am glad because of God my Savior. He cares for me, his humble servant.

From now on, all people will say God has blessed me. God All-Powerful has done great things for me, and his name is holy.

He always shows mercy to everyone who worships him.

The Lord has used his powerful arm to scatter those who are proud. He drags strong rulers from their throne and puts humble people in places of power.

God gives the hungry good things to eat and sends the rich away with nothing. He helps his servant Israel and is always merciful to his people. The Lord made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his family forever!

Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months. Then she went back home.

(Luke 1:46-56)