"God With Us"

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Matthew 1:18-25

Mason, Michigan

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

Many of us in this room have heard today's Gospel story so many times we could practically recite it from memory. I want to encourage you to listen as if you are hearing it *for the very first time.*

"Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way." This is the very first story Matthew tells. He began with a genealogy, and now comes the narrative, the first specific *event* that he thinks is important: the birth of Jesus the Messiah. M ark skips the birth entirely; John begins before the dawn of creation; Matthew and Luke are the only two Gospel writers who want to tell us about the birth of Jesus. But they each tell different pieces of the story. Only Matthew tells us about Joseph's angelic dream.

"When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit." The New Testament tells us absolutely nothing about Mary's family of origin. Later Christian legends say that her parents were named Joachim and Anna, that Mary's birth was also miraculous, and that Mary was born entirely free from sin, a doctrine known in the Roman Catholic Church as the "immaculate conception." None of that is mentioned in the Bible. In truth we know *nothing* about Mary's parents or the circumstances of her birth. We know much more about Joseph's origins. Both Matthew and Luke show, through their genealogies, that Joseph was a direct descendant of King David. Matthew says that Joseph was the descendant of a long line of Israelite kings. Luke says that Joseph was descended from a long line of commoners. We don't know which of those is more accurate, but I'm confident they both believed that their sources of information were reliable. If Matthew is correct, then Joseph had a great deal of *royalty* among his distant ancestors.

"Mary had been engaged to Joseph." The marriage customs were different then, but you get the point: Mary has been pledged to Joseph. She would become his wife. The Bible does not give us their ages. Some Christian interpreters think they *know* how old Mary was at this point, but that is just speculation; there is no data. It is likely that she was a teenager. Beyond that we cannot say. She was almost certainly still living with her parents; Matthew emphasizes the fact that she and Joseph were not yet living together. But – surprise! – "she was found to be pregnant." This would *not* have been good. Matthew tells us that this happened "through the Holy Spirit," but at this point Joseph does not know that very important detail. She was just "found to be pregnant." Which means, he assumes, *somebody* had impregnated her. Had she been sneaking out of her parents' house to have clandestine rendezvous with a secret boyfriend? You can imagine all the things that might have been going through his mind. He knew *for sure* that it wasn't *his* child! There was somebody else. Was he feeling hurt? Angry? Jealous? Betrayed? How would *you* feel, if you were in his shoes? And what was *Mary* thinking? Over in Luke's Gospel, Mary receives a visit from the angel Gabriel *before* she becomes pregnant. Matthew

doesn't tell us that. If all we had was Matthew's Gospel, we might think her pregnancy was as much a surprise to *Mary* as it was to *Joseph*. So what might *she* have been feeling? Shock? Bewilderment? Fear? There were *rules* about what should be done if a man discovers that his new bride has slept with someone else: "they shall bring the young woman out to the entrance of her father's house, and the men of her town shall stone her to death, because she committed a disgraceful act in Israel by prostituting herself in her father's house." (Deuteronomy 22:20-21) Joseph had the legal right to report Mary and have her executed. That's what *could* have happened. That's how this story *could* have gone.

But Joseph was "a righteous man." He was "unwilling to expose her to public disgrace." He *cared* about her. She may have broken his heart, but does not wish to see her dead. So he comes up with what seems to be the best plan: "to divorce her quietly." To break the nuptial agreement. Mary would, in that case, remain in her parents' care. Would she ever get married? Would the child ever have a father? This is a *terrible* situation for all of them. None of the possible outcomes look good.

Except. *There is a God.* There is a God who has a *plan*. There is a God who has chosen to involve that young couple in a process that would lead to *the redemption of the entire world.* There is *so* much more going on here than what Joseph can see. The situation is dire. He is about to make a decision that would have *terrible* consequences. And *God intervenes*. God steps into the scene, far more directly than God often does when people are contemplating major decisions. God decided that Joseph needed to know the *truth.* "Just when [Joseph] had resolved to [divorce Mary quietly], an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream." All of us have dreams. Some dreams are more important than others. Some dreams contain subtle messages that we need to pay attention to. This was a dream above all dreams. Perhaps the most important dream *ever*. A dream that fundamentally changed *everything*.

"Joseph!" called the angel. "Son of David!" Hey *you*, descendant of kings, *pay attention!* "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife!" *Stop what you're doing*, man, and *listen up!* "The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit!" Wait – *say what?* "The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." This probably wasn't the first time Joseph had heard of the "holy Spirit" of God. It's mentioned in the 51st Psalm, and twice in the book of Isaiah. But to imagine that the Holy Spirit of God was doing something in *Mary's* life, in *Joseph's* life, at that terrible, fateful moment – *what is going on here?!?*

"She will bear a son," the angel says. "You are to name him Jesus." That's our English version of that name, which frankly isn't very accurate. His Greek name was *Jesous*. His Hebrew name would have been *Yeshua*. The name means, "He will save." The angel is telling Joseph to name the child *He Will Save*. Why? Because, the angel explains, "he will save his people from their sins." The child's *name* indicates what the child will *do*. The world Joseph lived in was suffering under the weight of human sin. The world *we* live in is still *is* suffering under the weight of human sin. This child, *He Will Save*, will do something to *change* that. He didn't *eliminate* sin – as we all know. We all *do* it, we all *participate* in it, we all *suffer the consequences* of it. It hasn't gone away. It's not going to go away anytime soon. But Jesus is here to *save* us from it. To *rescue* us. To *redeem* us. To *restore* us. To *liberate* us from its power.

When Joseph wakes, he does *exactly* what he had been told to do. He is a model of faithfulness.

Matthew pauses a moment to tell us: "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet." This was all planned. This is the fulfillment of a promise God had made *long* before. Seven hundred years earlier, God had spoken powerfully to and through a man named

Isaiah, during a particularly tumultuous period in Israelite history. The mighty Assyrian army was on the move, invading and conquering. What should the king of Judah do prevent utter ruin for his people? Surrender? Stand and fight? Two neighboring kingdoms had formed an alliance against the Assyrians. Those kingdoms were pressuring and threatening Judah to join them. Isaiah encourages the king of Judah to ask God for a sign. The proud king doesn't want to do that. He thinks the best plan is to play nice with Assyria. Isaiah gives him a sign anyway, a prophecy about a "young woman" who is "with child" who "shall bear a son" whose name will be "Immanuel." (I'll come back to that word in a minute.) Isaiah says: before that child knows how to choose between right and wrong, "the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted." The Assyrians are going to wipe those two kingdoms out of existence. Jewish interpreters think the "young woman" Isaiah was referring to was probably *Isaiah's own wife*, and the "son" would be *their own child*. Isaiah and his wife already had two children; the traditional Jewish understanding is that they went on to have a *third* son, whom they called "Immanuel."

Matthew interprets that prophecy differently. In a bold move, Matthew declares the "young woman" was not Isaiah's wife, but is instead *Mary*, the mother of Jesus. How can he say this? Well, Matthew wrote his Gospel in Greek, and so he quotes from a Greek translation of the book of Isaiah, not the Hebrew original. In that Greek translation, Isaiah 7:14 doesn't say "young woman;" it uses a word for a young woman who is sexually pure. A *virgin*. So if Matthew – or anyone! - were reading the book of Isaiah in its Greek translation, there is *no way* that the "virgin" in the prophecy could be referring to Isaiah's wife, because she had already given birth to two children! So Isaiah *must* have been referring to someone else. Matthew declares: he was referring to *Mary*. That young virgin who was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. *She* is the one who will give birth to a child who will be called "Emmanuel."

That word "Emmanuel" is sometimes spelled with an "I" and sometimes with an "E." Both are correct. If you're translating from Hebrew, it's an I; if you're translating from Greek, it's an E. Both words mean the same thing: "God with us." The Hebrew word "im" is a preposition meaning "with." "Manu" means "us." So "Immanu" means "with us." "El" is a traditional word for "God". "Immanuel": "With us – God." "With us is God." "God is with us." This name is symbolic. Like the name "Jesous" or "Yeshua", it *means* something. It conveys a truth about who Jesus is. Jesus is *God*. God … *with us*.

This baby that's coming … it's not just any baby. Mary and Joseph are being entrusted with the most important baby ever to be born. A baby that is no less than *God*. God is not *out there* somewhere, passively and dispassionately watching us from afar. No. God came *here*, actively and passionately *participating* in all of our lives. God is choosing to take on flesh, to become *fully human*, without ever ceasing to be fully divine. Choosing to come here … to *change* some things. To fundamentally *alter* the course of human existence. To *save* us from the sin that we do, that we participate in, that we suffer from. To do what we could not do on our own. *Rescue* us. *Redeem* us. *Restore* us. *Liberate* us. This "Emmanuel" will do this in multiple ways. He will *teach*. He will *heal*. He will *cast out demons*. He will, when needed, confront the oppressive religious people and institutions that are standing in the way of God. He will, when needed, overturn the tables of those who are committing injustice in the name of God. Ultimately, with his death, he will give himself as a sacrificial offering, taking upon himself the sin of the entire world, liberating us from its weight. And ultimately, with his resurrection, he will pave the way for us to live anew. *This* baby will do all these things. This *God-With-Us*. This *Emmanuel*.

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