

**“The Birth”**  
**Matthew 1:18-25**  
**October 1, 2017**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

This is a traditional Christmas passage, describing the birth of Jesus through Joseph’s eyes. Luke’s more well-known account describes the same event through Mary’s eyes. We’re not starting the Advent season early, just taking the next passage in our study of Matthew’s account of the good news of Jesus.

Our family occasionally enjoys telling the birth stories of our children. We will talk about Wendy’s 36 hours of labor prior to Matthew’s birth and Meredith’s near arrival on the side of the road as Wendy and I drove through heavy traffic outside Baltimore and barely made it to the hospital in time. We also speak of Kathryn’s very active behavior while Wendy was pregnant with her, a prelude of things to come with her. We talk about the large size of our babies at birth (averaging over 10 pounds each), their red skin and abundant hair and much else. It’s fun to remember and celebrate these things.

Matthew must have felt great joy in telling the story of Jesus’ birth. It was a birth that was also a prelude of things to come. In Jesus’ case, the things to come were great things. So it is not surprising to read of the indication of those things present in the birth itself. I want us to look at three of the significant events Matthew chooses to address around the birth of Jesus. They are the parents of Jesus, the names of Jesus and the conception of Jesus.

**I. The Parents of Jesus**

While Matthew mentions Mary, his focus is principally on Joseph, Jesus’ adopted father. What kind of parents would God entrust with his beloved Son? You can tell a great deal about people by how they handle major disruptions in life. We first see Joseph as he encounters just such a situation involving his engagement to Mary. It was common practice in this day for Jewish men to marry sometime between 18 and 20 years of age, after they had acquired a skill and had saved some money. Women usually married a bit younger, typically not long after going through puberty. We can all imagine Joseph’s excitement as he looks forward to his coming marriage. But then all his hopes for his future marriage are dashed when Mary turns up pregnant, and he knows he is not the father.

Joseph has only two options open to him, and both involve divorce. Engagement in this culture was different from our engagement practices, being

much more like a marriage in every way except the couple continues to live separately and does not have sexual relations. The only way to break such an engagement was through divorce. Giving Mary a second chance by continuing with the marriage plans was not an option for Joseph. Jewish law of that era demanded that a man divorce his wife if she was guilty of adultery, and Mary's pregnancy was proof positive of her adultery in Joseph's mind. So Joseph's options were either to divorce her publicly or quietly.

The text tells us that because he was a just or righteous man who didn't want to shame her, he decided upon the quiet route. We can begin to appreciate the great character of Joseph when we understand the cost Joseph would have to pay to take this path. A public divorce would communicate clearly that Mary was guilty of adultery, thus preserving Joseph's reputation in the community when it would be made clear that the child she carried was not his. So in order to save her from shame, he would have to take on some of it himself. Further, he would have paid a financial cost. By taking her to court in a public divorce, he could have laid claim to her dowry, the assets she brought into the marriage, as well as reclaiming the bride price he would have paid. So we see something of his character in this decision of a quiet divorce, being concerned about Mary's well-being over his own.

Then his plans are disrupted again when the angel visits him. Plan A was to take Mary as his wife, and that plan has already been abandoned because of Mary's pregnancy. Now Plan B, to divorce her quietly, must also be abandoned for Plan C which comes to him direct from God through the angel. **“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit”** (v. 20). This plan would also mean shame for Joseph, for the simple reason that outsiders would assume that he had gotten Mary pregnant before the wedding. In an honor-shame culture such as this one, Joseph would remain an object of shame. He wouldn't even have been able to state the truth without increasing his shame. Imagine the response he would have received had he simply told the truth contained in this passage. “Joseph, we've heard excuses for sin before, but never such a bold tale as you are telling here.” Joseph, like his Son, would be the object of shame in order to release others from such shame.

In the entire New Testament, Joseph never speaks a single word. But he acts faithfully time and time again. So we read at the end of our passage that Joseph **“did as the angel of the Lord commanded him”** (v. 24). It will not be the last time he acts faithfully. In the next chapter, we read that an angel appeared to him again and told him to flee to Egypt to escape the murderous intentions of King Herod. This young father again submitted to the will of God and embraced the life of a refugee far from home. Quiet Joseph, faithful Joseph speaks loudly to us. It is sometimes the case that the people who talk the most are the ones who are most unfaithful. They use words to mask hearts of unfaithfulness. They can talk a good game, but if they ever get in the game it

quickly becomes evident that talking a good game is the only thing they can do. Part of Joseph's attractiveness is simply that he acts faithfully without feeling the need to talk about it.

The heart of his faithfulness was his submission to the will of God. Like Mary, whose submission Luke recorded, the parents God chose for his beloved Son had both learned something of this quality of submission. There is an important parenting application in this. Submission to God's will is a crucial part of good parenting. As a parent, you don't get to decide what your child will be. You don't get to decide their personality, their gifts, their likes and dislikes, their body type and countless other features. You also don't get to define their future. That's God's role. Your role is to submit to God's decision, love your child and train him or her to love and trust God.

## II. The Names of Jesus

The Bible records many descriptions of Jesus that we might even call names. He is the Lamb of God, the Prince of Peace, the Mighty God, the Wonderful Counselor, the Friend of Sinners, and much else. But two of his principle names are the ones that are stated right at the outset: Jesus and Immanuel.

Let's look first at the name "Jesus." **"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins"** (v. 21). It is the New Testament form of the Hebrew name "Joshua." It means "Jehovah helps." Just as the Old Testament character by this name led Israel into the Promised Land, so Jesus leads us across the Jordan into our permanent home with God. The name "Jesus" doesn't mean that God helps us in some general way, because the angel goes on to specify the central form of that help. **"He will save his people from their sins."** This was at odds with the common expectation of a Messiah in Israel at this time. They were expecting and wanting a Messiah to deliver them from their enemies, principally the Romans at this point. In a sense, they wanted someone to deliver them from sinners, not sin. I think we often want the same thing. We think our problems lie in all the things that seem to be against us. We don't have enough money, our spouse turns out to be different than we had hoped, our bodies let us down because of some health challenge, and on and on. Those may indeed be problems, and I don't want to minimize any of them. But none of them are our central problem. Your central problem is not anyone or anything else, but yourself. You are a sinner justly deserving the judgment of God, and there is nothing you can do to address that problem. Until you accept that truth, Jesus will be about as welcome in your life as he was to the many Jewish leaders who only wanted a Messiah to address their Roman problem. But once you do accept that truth, and come to see that Jesus has come to save us from our sin problem, you will love the name of Jesus.

The second name, Immanuel, means “God with us.” The presence of God with his people is a central theme of the Bible. In the Garden of Eden, prior to Adam’s rebellion, God walked with Adam in the cool of the day. It was like two friends sitting on the front porch after a day of satisfying, fruitful work, enjoying one another’s company and reviewing the events of the day in joyful celebration. But Adam’s sin resulted in his expulsion from the Garden. God could no longer be so accessible to Adam without Adam’s immediate death. Holiness in the Creator and sin in the creature are a toxic mix for the creature, every single time. But God’s love is a faithful love, and he immediately began preparing for the restoration of his presence with his people. These preparations included the tabernacle, in which through elaborate sacrificial rituals God allowed for limited access between him and his people. With the birth of Jesus, since Jesus is God in the flesh, we experience a new phase in God being present with his people. He walked among our race of fallen humanity as one of us, except without sin. But that was only temporary and only a limited number of people were able to share in that experience. Thankfully, this name of “Immanuel” is meant to describe more than Jesus walking the earth during the 33 years of his life here at his first coming. He is coming back, and he will take up residence with his people forever when he does so. Paradise will once again be opened to us. According to the book of Revelation, the Tree of Life is there and we can eat freely of it and will live forever with the Lord.

As a prelude to that time when we will live on the earth forever with the Lord, Jesus gives us a promise for the current era in which we are living. The book of Matthew closes with this promise. **“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”** (28:20). Jesus is with us now through the Holy Spirit. This promise addresses a deep psychological fear we all have, the fear of abandonment, of being all alone. I will confess to you that one of my fears is that everyone in our church is going to leave except my wife. And the only reason she will stay is because she’s my wife and feels she has no choice. I recognize that it is an irrational fear, but I still find it gnawing at the edges of my psyche anyway. Immanuel speaks into this fear of abandonment. I have it by the word of Jesus himself, and by the very name of Jesus, Immanuel, that he will never abandon me. He will never leave me alone. And since Jesus has people who follow him, I can have confidence that his people, at least those who remain faithful to him, will not abandon me either.

The little pronoun, “with,” is a powerful pronoun. Jesus promises, “I am *with* you always.” If Jesus is with me always, and also with you, then I am with you too and you with me. That doesn’t mean that there won’t be times in this fallen world when we will need to battle loneliness. But it does mean that we will never be abandoned, and even if we must battle loneliness from time to time, we can know that it will not be permanent. God is with us. What a beautiful truth!

### **III. The Conception of Jesus**

Jesus was conceived by the virgin Mary. And as the Apostle's Creed states, he was also born of the virgin Mary. Our text teaches both the virgin conception and the virgin birth of Jesus. The virgin birth is taught in verse 25 which states that Joseph did not have marital relations with Mary until after the birth of Jesus. This verse is used by some to teach the perpetual virginity of Mary, that she stayed a virgin her entire life. But I think it better to understand the verse in its more natural sense of teaching that Joseph and Mary did not have relations until after the birth of Jesus.

I recognize that some have a problem with the virgin conception of Jesus. It is certainly the case that this was a miracle from God. Every other conception of a baby requires a contribution from a human male and a human female. But not this one. There were still two parties, a human female, Mary, and the Holy Spirit. Part of Jesus' DNA was from Mary and part of it was from the Holy Spirit. But why should that raise an objection to our minds? Could not the God who spoke the stars into existence speak again and create a sperm to impregnate Mary?

There is a theological reason for this conception by the Holy Spirit. It is God, and not human initiative, that brings Jesus to Mary and to everyone else. A Savior like Jesus does not come at our initiative, but at God's. And there is a sense in which every time someone is born again, that person is experiencing a miracle that is not unlike this one. It is a new birth authored by God himself. I read this week of a converted miner in the Wesleyan revival in eighteenth-century England who was asked by his mocking co-workers if he really believed Jesus changed water to wine. The miner, who formerly had something of a drinking problem, replied, "I don't know if Jesus changed water into wine, but I do know that in my house he changed beer into furniture."

### **CONCLUSION:**

As we saw earlier, Joseph wanted to divorce Mary quietly in order not to shame her. Matthew reports that as an act of righteousness. Joseph's actions point forward to what his adopted son, Jesus will do. He was born under a cloud of shame, lived a life of weakness and poverty seen as shameful by many, and died a shameful death. Jesus embraced shame that we might be delivered from the shame of our sin.

**Small Group Discussion Questions:  
Matthew 1:18-25**

1. If you are married, share how you and your spouse got engaged. What were the joys involved in that? Were there any fears involved?
2. Given the nature of betrothal in Joseph's day (see sermon manuscript), try to imagine what it would have been like for Joseph to receive the news of Mary's pregnancy. What would it have been like for Mary?
3. God often seems to break through in significant and ultimately good ways in our lives through major disruptions just like this. Can you think of times in your life when God has brought a good gift to you through some significant disruption? How does this change our attitude toward a present disruption? Is there a present disruption going on in your life?
4. Joseph never speaks in the New Testament, but his actions are always faithful. There are some who could be described just the opposite, always talking but not so faithful in follow through. What is going on inside of us when we substitute words for actions? What needs to be going on inside of us to be like quietly faithful Joseph?
5. The name "Jesus" means "God, help" or "God helps." What are some times in your life when you commonly find yourself uttering this prayer for God to help you? While it is appropriate to ask God to help us with any problem we are facing, the angel says that the central problem Jesus has come to help us with is our sin. How aware are you that this is your central problem? How might such awareness increase?
6. The name "Immanuel" means "God with us." Many of us have a deep fear of abandonment, the feeling that others really don't want to be with us and are only present because for some reason they have to be. What difference would it make in your life if you really believed that God wants to be with you? If we also believe that one of God's tangible expressions of this is for his Church to be with people, what difference might that make?
7. The virgin conception of Jesus, among other things, shows that God takes the initiative in our salvation. What practical difference does that make in your life?