**Matthew 1:18-25** December 18, 2022

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*Matthew 1:18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. 19Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

*20But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” 22All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”*

*24When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Jesus IS the Plan—and You Are Part of It**

**I.** The life history of Jesus begins in a most fantastical way. ***“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child.”*** Okay. ***“pledged to be married… found to be with child.”*** Well, these things happen. But it says, ***“Before they came together… found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.”*** People hear that and think, “Come on! That’s not how things work.” Start with that about Jesus and Christmas, and no wonder people roll their eyes at Christians.

Kind of like UFOs. Now I’m not going to get into the debate about whether they exist or not. But for the sake of argument, let’s say you *did* have a UFO experience. Whom would you tell? I’ll tell you what. You won’t go down to the street corner and tell everyone you meet. They’d medicate you and lock you up! In fact, I’m not sure you would actually tell anyone! You’d probably just bottle it up for decades until even you weren’t sure it actually happened.

Kind of like an experience I had. Not a UFO, but a man I knew and trusted implicitly, over 50 years ago was a direct witness of a miracle. He had the proof. Years after he told me, but about 30 years ago I was in the Seminary practice teaching a lesson about prayer to classmates. I included that miracle as proof that prayer works. After class, a classmate said, “You just made that up, didn’t you.” “No.” “Whatever!” It turned out no one believed me. This is Seminary students! They couldn’t accept that someone had witnessed an honest-to-goodness amazing miracle in answer to prayer.

You don’t go talk and about UFOs… or miracles… or virgin births for that matter, to just anyone. And maybe not at all.

Except, that is how Matthew introduces Jesus to the world. The Virgin Birth is the central fact of today’s reading. It’s important enough that we confess it every week, whether the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed. “We believe that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.”

When the angel announced this unbelievable news to Joseph, he added some other important information. ***“You are to give him the name Jesus.”***

Now why “Jesus”? Well, names mean things. “Jesus” the name is Greek for the Hebrew name Joshua, sort of like Peter is English for the Spanish Pedro. “Jesus” and “Joshua” both mean “The Lord saves.” Many Jewish parents named their baby boys Joshua or Jesus. It was a statement of faith. They were saying, “The God of Israel, the Lord, is our Savior.”

But Joseph and Mary would name their boy Jesus not as a statement of faith, but because as the angel said, *“your little boy* ***will save his people.”*** His name wouldn’t be a tribute to a savior. This little boy’s name would *identify* the Savior, because he *is* the Savior. (Incidentally, not only did the angel tell Joseph this in Matthew chapter 1, but in Luke chapter 1 he also told Mary that this child would be named Jesus.)

The angel went a step farther. He got specific about what this Savior would save them from. This is a very important point. If you ever watch online or attend a variety of churches, when you walk away you should always ask yourself, “What does this church put out there as the number one problem that Christ saves me from?” If you are paying attention, you will find that different churches identify different things as “the big problem.” Some want to save you from a life not lived to its full potential, so then they will talk about all the ways that implementing God’s will in your life will help you get your act together and optimize your potential. Other churches seem to think that the big problem is poverty, or not really poverty but not being rich. Just saw clips the other day of one of these preachers. He was going along and suddenly started looking at his arm and said he could see little specks of gold appearing on his hand and arms. “Anyone else seeing it?” Other churches seem to think that Jesus is all about saving us from ill health. All of them have forgotten what Jesus is really about. Stay away from online material and books from people like that.

Thankfully there are churches, and not just Lutheran ones—but I would say we do this far more consistently than most—who actually listen to the angel as he speaks to Joseph. And what does he say? ***“You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from…”*** from what? ***“From their sins.”*** Let people imagine what they want to imagine about the baby in a manger. He appeared in that manger not because we are disorganized or sick or poor but because we are sinners. And he is a Savior!

The angel continues. He tells Joseph the child will be Immanuel, ***“God with us.”*** This, too, could just be a nice religious name. Over the years, you have heard of, maybe even known, someone named Immanuel. Maybe the parents wanted that child’s name to be a daily reminder of God’s blessing. Maybe they hoped their child’s name would always remind the child of his God. But to Joseph and Mary Immanuel would be no mere reminder. “Immanuel” is who this child is.

He is true God taking on human flesh; the immortal and invisible stooping to a place of birth and date of birth. He is The One Above Us who walks with us. This child is God’s plan to save us. He isn’t part of the plan. He *is* the Plan.

The godless world and the gods of other faiths are cardboard cutouts in comparison. They tell us to improve ourselves so that we can somehow save ourselves. Our broken human condition does not allow that to happen. Those faiths suggest that we follow a path to ascend into heaven. The Christ-child is heaven come to earth. Jesus didn’t come to show us a way, *in a sense* we can even say that he didn’t come to *show us the* way because he *is* the Way, the Truth, the Life; not part of the plan, but The Plan. That’s the child announced to Joseph.

**II.** Imagine the impact on Joseph!

On the one hand, the message was an unlooked for relief. Joseph was a good man, a righteous man, and Mary was a good and virtuous woman. But her news in the previous days had broken his heart. She had insisted that she had not been unfaithful, but what could he think?

\*\*\* Here something needs to be pointed out that isn’t exactly in line with this sermon, but living in our world we need to be reminded. Joseph knew that God prohibits intimate relations outside of marriage. That is sin. Which means that moving in, living together, shacking up, or whatever you want to call it is not just sin but a choice to live in continual sin.\*\*\*

That being said, Mary had insisted that she had not been unfaithful, but what could Joseph think? He loved her, but there was only one possible explanation. So, he had decided that instead of going to a court of law, he would divorce her secretly in the presence of two witnesses; keep it quiet and hope that she would not suffer shame. But now, by an angel in a dream, Joseph realized that Mary’s tearful unbelievable promises were true. What joy!

But about that child, what would that news do to you if you were Joseph? We have no idea how old Joseph was, but if he and Mary were like most marrying couples, he was probably a young man, around 18 years old. If you haven’t been 18 in a decade or two, take a moment to remember yourself at 18. You liked to think you had the world by the tail, but you were still trying to figure it out. Deep down you knew there was a lot of stuff you weren’t ready for yet. We were all like that at 18. Imagine the angels’ message in the ears of a young man like that!

Imagine an angel telling you that your unexpected little child is going to be the Savior of the world. Wouldn’t you just be deer-in-the-headlights confused, and then happy that the Savior is coming, and then worried about whether you were going to mess things up, and then annoyed that God laid something that heavy on you—I mean, all you wanted was an ordinary life in an ordinary Jewish town. And then you start to pray asking God to guide you, and who knows where all the emotions will end?

But the more you think of it, the more you feel like a fifth wheel. Neither God nor Mary needs you for this child to be born. Mary would probably be a great single mother anyway. God seems just be going ahead with his plans without consulting you, and maybe you feel like you are just along for the ride. “What is your purpose in all of this, Joseph?” you keep asking yourself.

Then the angel commanded Joseph, ***“Take Mary home as your wife.”*** God didn’t need Joseph, not in any absolute sense. But he wants Joseph. He has a place for Joseph. Joseph will enrich the lives of Mary and that little baby by his presence. “You are blessed to be a husband and father.” God tells him. “Be a good one.”

***“You*** *[not Mary, you Joseph]* ***are to give him the name Jesus.”*** At eight days of age, on the day of circumcision, Joseph was to declare that this little child of the covenant would be named Jesus. Joseph would go on to obey and fulfill the angel’s words. In the following months Joseph would make a middle of the night get-away to a foreign country and save mother and child’s lives. And then he would be sure to get them back to that sleepy little town of Nazareth to live in safety. While living in Nazareth Joseph would make sure that young Jesus got to the annual celebrations of the Passover in Jerusalem. God’s plan was too mighty for Joseph to stand in the way of it. And it was too grand for Joseph to plan. But that plan, Jesus, has a place for Joseph and all to find not only salvation, but also meaning.

**III.** Change the scenery. You walk into a strange church, or maybe even your own familiar church. You feel a little like Joseph could have felt when he realized that child will be born with or without him. You feel like a fifth wheel. The preacher preaches, the organist plays, the people sing, the bulletins are folded, the stain glass shines, the bathrooms are clean. “They don’t need me here.” It’s not self-pity. It just that God has things under control. No help needed.

Remember: God’s plan is too mighty to stand in the way of. But that plan, Jesus, has a place for all to find not only salvation, but also meaning in him. Only listen as Joseph listened to that angel. Love one another. Help the needy, encourage the downtrodden, be a friend to the mourner, build up the church, spread the message, sing the songs, fold the bulletins, hand out the food boxes, teach the children. God has a place for the redeemed in his kingdom here on earth. Listen to his message and you will find your place, if you have ears and a heart to hear about Jesus—who saves his people from their sins. Amen.