

**Matthew 1:18-25**  
**Born of the Virgin Mary.**

Ruskin Falls, December 9, 2018  
Pulaski Heights Presbyterian Church  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

TEXT (English translation: NRSV)

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

(1)

Joseph and Mary are young; they are engaged to get married; and then it happens. Mary becomes pregnant, and all Joseph knows is: he's not the father. And pretty soon, others are going to start finding out as well.

Now, it is easy for us, in our Christmas modes of thought, just to skip from *that* problematic situation right into angels and the Holy Spirit and assurances that all is well. However, as Matthew reminds us, it didn't happen that way.

Admittedly, Joseph reacts with moderation. One could even say he reacts with a gentle concern for Mary's well-being. But also, Joseph is hurt; he feels shamed; he feels betrayed. He cannot change what has happened, but he will not live with it either. He will not stay with Mary. He will go his way without her, and leave her to go her way without him.

But then Joseph has this *dream*. And in the dream, an angel indicates that the child Mary is carrying is from the Holy Spirit, and that Joseph should stay with Mary and, upon its birth, give the child its name.

In Joseph's world, for him to stay and give the child its name would have highly important consequences. (See Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Doubleday, 1993, p.139.) According to the customs of the time, for Joseph to stay and give the child its name, would amount to Joseph's *adoption* of the child as belonging to his own family, his own flesh and blood. And Joseph did that. When the child was born, Joseph adopted him by giving him the name, *Jesus*.

(2)

We could, of course, ask: Why did Joseph believe a dream? Why did Joseph *really* act on a *dream* and, so, stay with Mary and adopt her child as his own? There are lots of ways of interpreting dreams. Why would Joseph interpret this dream as guidance from God, and not as just a dream that he can quickly enough forget?

Joseph had a dream about Mary, Mary's child, and an angel. And maybe all we can really say is that something somehow had *prepared* Joseph to hear the word of God in this dream. Something in this dream, or something already in Joseph himself, let him believe that the dream was God's way of telling him God wants him to stay with Mary to help raise this child. And Joseph stayed.

However, not everyone dreamed such a dream. Only Joseph. All that most folks in town thought (or soon would think) was: Mary's pregnant! And she and Joseph aren't even married! And do you really believe Joseph's the father? And: Why won't she tell the truth?

In the New Testament itself there actually are a few passages where, after Jesus is a grown man, people who know his family make remarks that imply the suspicion that Jesus was born of an affair between Mary and someone other than Joseph. Surely suspicions and rumors regarding Jesus's parentage made the rounds. And probably they received a little spicing from many a soul who, somehow needing someone to point a finger at and look down on, found in Mary and Joseph an easy target.

My point is this: Understandably enough, in our Christmas modes of thought, we think of Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus in affectionate religious imagery as "the holy family." But at the time, the time of Joseph and Mary, most folks who knew them didn't see it that way. They thought this family considerably less than what the law of God would let them call holy. Most folks thought scandalous things were going on here!

### (3)

Matthew's story of Jesus's birth is the story of God's becoming incarnate *in* human life – the story of God's coming to presence *in* a flesh-and-blood human being – for the sake of us flesh-and-blood human beings. The story reminds us of and invites us to celebrate the *mystery* of God's saving presence in our lives.

Probably it would be fair to say that, when we read Matthew's story of Jesus's birth, what we first and foremost see – what, in our eyes, stands out above all else – is the *miraculous* and the *marvelous*. We think first of a glorious angel appearing to Joseph; and we think of Jesus's birth occurring in an amazing and unique and incredible way.

This morning I want to suggest that we need to be careful at this point. We need to be careful about how our sense of the *mystery* of Christmas becomes tied to our own, present-day, sense of the incredible, the amazing, and the marvelous.

For example, it's easy for us to think, "Oh, how wonderful it was for Joseph. An angel made it all so clear." However, it was *never* all so clear for Joseph! Joseph struggled with his decision the same way anyone else would have. The woman to whom he's engaged is carrying someone else's child. And Joseph doesn't just meet with a direct answer from God. Joseph has only a dream. And when he awakens, he still has to figure out how to *understand* that dream. Joseph could just as well have decided the dream meant nothing – or even that it was from Satan, trying to play a cruel trick on him.

And even when we know that Joseph believed the dream was from God, that doesn't tell us everything. *For all we know, Joseph himself never really believed in the virgin birth!* For all we know, he himself always believed there was another man. For all we know, Joseph simply

awoke from his sleep filled with the sense that, regardless of how Mary had become pregnant – and even if she had been with another man! – the Spirit of God was upon this child in a special way, and God had a special role for Joseph to play in this particular child’s life.

And so – perhaps quite confidently, but maybe at first only very nervously! – Joseph stayed. Whatever else he believed, Joseph believed God wanted him there for Mary and for this child. In the end, there was no amazing and incredible angel giving Joseph clear and distinct answers. In the end, he struggled as any other would struggle, to understand. And when he decided it was indeed God’s will that he stay, he then stayed. And he named the child “Jesus.”

(4)

In any case, when we reflect on the mystery of Christmas, we should think not only about the angel in Joseph’s dream, but also about Joseph’s struggle with his own feelings and with his fear of what other people are going to think about him and his family.

And of course maybe Joseph *did* believe in the virgin birth. Maybe he *did* believe there was no other man involved. After all, Joseph lived in the age of the Roman Empire. Joseph’s own world was surrounded and in many ways dominated by Roman culture. And in that world and culture, stories long had been in circulation about individuals said to have been conceived through the union of a human being with a god. The emperor, Augustus, for example, who ruled over the Roman Empire when Jesus was born, was said to have been conceived through a human mother and a god.

You and I don’t expect that sort of thing in the world as we know it. And that’s why, when we read Matthew’s story of Jesus’s birth, we focus so quickly on it as a miraculous interruption of the laws of nature. We see first and foremost a story of God’s incredible interruption of the laws of nature. This morning, however, let me invite you to consider something else.

Set aside for a moment *our* reaction to Matthew’s story of the virgin birth, and consider the reaction of Matthew’s readers, back in the early decades of the church. As I said, the surrounding world was already familiar with stories about people whose birth was the result of conception between a human being and a god – people such as Caesar Augustus. Such stories were part of Roman culture.

So, very possibly, in that culture, Matthew’s story of someone born to a virgin would not have seemed quite so incredible as it does to us today. It is very possible that, in those days, Matthew’s story of a child born to a virgin actually would have been somehow easy enough to understand – *except for one thing*. There’s one thing about Matthew’s story that sets it apart from other such stories in Matthew’s time. It is this: *Matthew’s claim that this happened in a lower class family, to poor, powerless nobodies like Joseph and Mary.*

Folks in the Roman Empire had heard enough stories already about royalty and other mighty figures whose parentage was believed somehow to have been divine. For them, a story about a child conceived between a woman and a god was not enough to spark thoughts of mystery. What actually made people hearing Matthew’s story think “mystery” was, rather, this: *that God, the creator of heaven and earth, would have chosen to do this not among the mighty and the powerful of this world, but in a mere carpenter’s family.*

A carpenter’s family in those days was different from today. Nowadays we know carpenters as

skilled and respected members of the middle class. But that wasn't true in Joseph's time. Back then, a carpenter's family was lacking in education, as often as not was just plain illiterate, and lived constantly close to having to get by on inadequate food and clothing. Back then, a carpenter's family enjoyed no prestige, no clout, and little comfort. They numbered among the *nobodies* of this world, those whom the high and mighty snubbed as inferior, shunned as loathsome, and exploited as expendable servants and laborers. What, people would have thought, would almighty God, creator of all things, be doing, becoming part of a family like *that*?

In Matthew's day, *precisely that belonged to the true mystery of Jesus's birth*. For Matthew *himself*, what is truly astonishing is not that Jesus was born of a virgin, but that Jesus was born to precisely *this* virgin in *this* kind of family. Jesus was born into a family that had to worry where the next meal is coming from. He was born into a family that was easily exploited by the rulers and by the laws and social customs of the Roman Empire. He was born into a family that was looked down on by powerful and influential people – looked down on by the movers and shakers of this world – as not really counting for much in the grand scheme of things.

*That*, Matthew is telling us, belongs to the Christmas mystery we most need to hear. The mystery we most need to hear is not the news that God is not subject to the laws of nature as we know them – after all, why *should* God, creator of all things – including those laws – be subject to those laws?! Rather, the *mystery* we most need to hear is that God has acted to enter our world and meet us here, *not* as one of the *powerful and mighty*, but as one who came in *lowliness*, through a baby born in a barn to a morally questionable family that belonged not to the haves but to the have-nots of this world. *That* is the real mystery! Here we are faced with a truly mystifying question: Why should this world's creator enter the world – a world now in the grip of sinful rebellion against God – in *lowliness* rather than as the obvious *victor over* sinfulness? Why does God's act of self-revelation in the world require us to turn not to a powerful political leader, nor to a strong societal leader, but to *such* a family in *such* a place, if we are to meet with God? Why, instead of wiping out injustice and inequality in one fell swoop, does God become part of a family that suffers *under* forces of injustice and inequality in our world? *That* is the mystery!

God hasn't told us why God chose to come among us in this way. Nor has God told us why God permits rather than simply wiping out all the hurt, all the sadness, all the suffering, all the injustice and equality that haunt us in this world. God hasn't told us why we must *await* the time of the justice and peace that God has promised us is coming. What, however, at Christmas, God *does* say to us, is this: Blessed are those who enter the barn in the night in the cold of winter to be *with* that poor, oppressed, and heckled couple that has taken shelter there with their newborn baby, who has only the feedbox of the animals for a bed; for those who do enter there shall see God.

The mystery we most need to hear in the Christmas story involves the mystery of almighty God's move to enter the world, not in a powerful show of divine superiority, but in human *lowliness*. Let us heed that mystery this Christmas, and let us give ourselves gladly in its service – “till peace shall over all the earth, its ancient splendors fling”! Amen.