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The Greatest Christmas Ever!

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TEXT: Matthew 1:18-25 (ESV)

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "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. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Merry Christmas to you. By now, the lights are on the trees. The packages are underneath. Christmas songs and carols have been playing in public places since Thanksgiving, and many families will be gathering for dinners and gift exchanging later on this week. It's another year of observing Christmas. Now, for some, Christmas is merely a celebration that recognizes one of history's most well-known citizens. It's kind of like George Washington's birthday. For others, it's nothing more than a nice holiday, a much-needed break from work or school. For stores, it's the most profitable time of the year as the sales soar. But for those of us who have personally met this one whose birthday it is, Christmas means so much more. Writer and popular speaker Art Fettig once noted, "Some businessmen are saying that this could be the greatest Christmas ever. I always thought that the first one was." He's right, according to God's Word.

This Christmas, we're going to be using Matthew's version of the first Christmas. You probably noticed in the reading some familiar things are missing in the account. There's no mention of Bethlehem or a stable or shepherds as we find it in Luke's gospel. But it does hold the same glorious good news for us. The story begins with the predicament – we find Joseph in a quandary. Mary, his betrothed, is pregnant and the child is not his, for he had not had sexual relations with Mary. Joseph was a man of integrity who lived by the rules of God. He'd never do that. And even though he was a man of faith, he found it quite difficult to believe Mary's story that this child in her was from the Holy Spirit. He must have been heartbroken, felt betrayed and hurt. He must have wondered if Mary had been unfaithful to him, that perhaps there was someone else that she loved and she was not committed to him. And not only that, he was afraid. Of course he was. This was so embarrassing. Mary was probably starting to show by this time, and they weren't fully married yet. Everyone in this small religious community could see this and there would be a scandal. Rumors, harsh judgments, and public shaming loomed in the future. Joseph had a good reputation of being a righteous man before God, a real straight shooter, and this situation was about to wipe all of that out. Joseph also cared about Mary, though, and he was afraid for her. He wanted to keep her from suffering public disgrace as well. He feared for her.

It's quite a predicament. “What should I do?”, he wondered, and eventually made up his mind that the wisest and kindest thing he could probably do was to divorce her as quietly as possible and spare Mary of any public shame. As he was considering how to go about doing this, God broke in and enlightened Joseph about his plan. He spoke to Joseph through one of his angels in a dream. He called him Joseph, Son of David. First notice, here, Joseph is addressed by that angel as “son of David.” That's not a throwaway line. Joseph's claim to fame as he was being a descendant of King David, who was Israel's all-time greatest king, to whom God had given a great promise. Addressing Joseph with this title, “Son of David” would have helped prepare Joseph for what he was about to hear. And it would also remind us, the readers, of God's promise to King David that his lineage would never end and would culminate with the birth of a king who would be a wonderful counselor, everlasting father, mighty God, and Prince of Peace. This promised King from David's descendants would reign forever, and come from his line. So, Israel had long been waiting for this king to come.

Next, Joseph heard, “So don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit, just as she said.” Now, this is the second time

we see a reference to the Holy Spirit being behind this pregnancy in our story. That tells us this is important information for us as well as for Joseph. The Holy Spirit is part of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, God is involved in this. He has made this happen. Mary's done nothing wrong. She's still a virgin. God is up to something special. Mary is carrying God's son. Which makes this child perfect in God's sight. He's true God, being divine. And he's also true man, the prototype as God originally intended. Without sin, He will perfectly obey all of God's commandments throughout his life. And Joseph was commanded, "She will bear a son. And you shall call his name Jesus." Joseph, you name him and claim him as your legal son. Suddenly Joseph's drafted into this mission. Jesus means "God saves." It represented a word of hope, of God sending salvation through a messiah king to his people someday. And this child will one day save his people from their sins.

Remember I said that this story begins with Joseph's predicament. It's part of a bigger story of a bigger predicament. Our greatest predicament as human beings, in fact, our sinfulness, which separates us from our holy and righteous God and leads us to eternal death. And this is what Jesus, true God and true man, was coming to take care of. He arrived that first Christmas to save us from our sin. Jesus will be the perfect atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world as true God and true man to save us from sin and death. He will take our place and take our punishment upon himself. He came to save us. I love this old saying, I've used it before, but I think it's so good. If our greatest need, it says, had been information, God would have sent an educator. And if our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent a scientist. If our greatest need was money, God would have sent an economist. If it were pleasure, God would have sent an entertainer. But our greatest need was forgiveness. So, God sent us a savior. This birth is a rescue mission: God rescuing his people from the predicament of sin and death. It will culminate at the cross and an empty tomb where Jesus will die in that cross to pay for our sins, and then be raised on the third day, conquering death for us.

At this point, then, Matthew drops this little editorial comment for us, his readers. He says "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the Prophet. Behold, the Virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us." That's a quote from Isaiah 7, meaning this child represents a kept promise from God that was made long ago. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises. And Emmanuel is not to be the child's name. It's already been told to us: Jesus. But that name now identifies for us who Jesus really is. He's more than a great

teacher or one of history's noblest and well-known citizens. Jesus is God with us, God in the flesh. God put skin on. We call that the Incarnation. He became touchable and approachable and breakable. He entered our world to be with us, to save us. He would experience all of life as we've experienced it, with its ups and downs. It's an amazing truth. And he has promised to be with us always to the close of the age that has not ended. He's with us. No moment of a believer's life is lived alone. God is with us.

The writer of Hebrews, seeing the implications of this truth, wrote

For we do not have a high priest, Jesus, who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one in who every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. So let us then, with confidence, draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and grace to help us in time of need.

He knows what we go through and he's sympathetic. Listen to the words of Saint Augustine regarding the Incarnation.

He so loved us that for our sake, he was made man in time. Although through him all times were made. He was made man who made men. He was created of a mother whom he created. He was carried by hands that he formed. He cried in the manger in wordless infancy. He, the word, without whom all human eloquence is mute.

In other words, God's gone to a great deal of trouble for you and me. He must really love us. I like this summary that I recently came across about what God has done for us through the coming of His Son, Jesus Christ. He came to our place. He took our place. And he invites us back to his place. He came to our place, the world. He took our place at the cross, and he invites us back to his place. That's Heaven.

So, God has done a great thing. That's what Christmas is all about. That's what's behind the celebration. God has come in the flesh to be with us and save us, because we could not save ourselves. So, what special thing can we do in response to this good news? Well, the first is obvious. Joseph believed the good news and acted in faith, didn't he? So first we receive the gift God offers in Jesus. We receive it through faith, believing that Jesus is God in the flesh who came to save us from our sins and gives us eternal life. You approach him with empty hands, humbly acknowledging that you're a sinner who can't save yourself. And that you want the gift of forgiveness God has offered you in Christ. And he will not turn you away. Like the Christmas Carol says, "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls

will receive him still, the Dear Christ enters in.” That’s a promise for us. So, if you haven’t received him yet, ask him in.

And if you have received him, then worship God, giving him praise for who he is and thanks for what he’s done for us, rescuing us. This story, you see, serves to reawaken us to the power of faithfulness and love of God. It shows us that He is not a hands-off creator who uncaringly or helplessly sits on the sideline and watches his drowning world from a distance. No, he loves us so much that he dives in for us to bring us to shore. And he does it in the most surprising ways. He can do the inconceivable. He specializes in things like virgin births and resurrections to save people. We see that he is a God who keeps his promises and can always be trusted in all things. His character and power and presence then, is our hope and our confidence. So yes, praising God for his greatness is definitely the right thing to be doing.

And we also thank him for what he has done for us. He has graciously given us the greatest gift of all – a savior, through whom we receive forgiveness for our sins and eternal life with Him. So come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord, God with us, who saves us from our sins. I’m reminded of this little song of thanks that I used to have my congregation sing at Christmastime. “There is a redeemer. Jesus, God’s own son. Precious lamb of God, Messiah. Holy one. Thank you, oh my father, for giving us your son, and leaving your spirit till the work on earth is done.”

Let’s pray. Almighty, wonderful, gracious God, thank you for loving us so much that you gave us a savior in an order to bring us home to you. Amen.