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Matthew 1:18-25

Second Message

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THE KING'S UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL

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Christmas is a time of anticipation, surprise, and joy. There is the anticipation of seeing family or friends, gathering in a warm house while the air outside is cold or the ground is blanketed with snow. There are surprises: someone shows up unexpectedly, you unwrap a present you never dreamed of getting. There is joy when laughter fills the room, when sweet fragrances waft from the kitchen, when the game of the century is on television, and when you gather around the table for a heavenly meal. Christmas isn't always so pleasant, yet most of us have dreams and visions dancing in our heads.

These Christmas themes come from the incarnation, for certainly we see anticipation, surprise, and joy in the arrival of Jesus. There was the anticipation of the Messiah, the one for whom the Jews had longed, the fulfillment of an ancient promise. There was surprise because no one could have anticipated a baby born to an obscure couple in an obscure place. And there was joy, heavenly joy and earthly joy, the joy of angels and shepherds and wise men. This morning we pause once again to reflect on the birth of the one who would be called Jesus. This advent season our focus is on Matthew's gospel, chapters one and two.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. (Matt 1:18-19 NAS95)

Verse 18 begins with the same word used in verse 1: "genesis," or origins. (Verses 1-17 recount a genealogy from Abraham to Joseph.) This critical history alerts us to the "Return of the King," the title of our study last week. Verse 18 begins the story of "The King's Unexpected Arrival." Two of the four gospels have a birth narrative, but Matthew's account is much briefer and more straightforward than Luke's poetic and song-filled version. Luke focuses on Mary, but Matthew puts the spotlight on Joseph.

We learn that Mary and Joseph were engaged to be married. This pledge was legally binding and could be broken only by divorce. Typically a couple would be engaged for a year before the wedding ceremony and starting their life as husband and wife. Couples had to be sexually pure during the engagement time; adultery was a cause for divorce.

We learn that the Messiah was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Mary would have been perhaps 14 years old. Matthew states this matter-of-factly, without argument of explanation. A first-time reader with no knowledge of the Old Testament would be aghast, but the Jewish reader was familiar with the Holy Spirit's presence at creation and at other dramatic points in the history of God's people. Matthew is setting up the reader to anticipate something extraordinary.

When Mary was found to be pregnant, Joseph probably felt like he had been hit with sledgehammer. But he had to take action. He was a righteous, a just man. As such would do what the law required, in this case divorce Mary. If he did not, then he too could be implicated in the pregnancy. The law of Deuteronomy demanded stoning, but this was not practiced in the first century. Joseph was a compassionate man. Instead of opting for the public divorce he decided to divorce Mary

privately, which was legally possible, and send her away. But before he could take action, God intervened through an angelic messenger.

But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." (1:20-21)

This is the first of four times in the opening two chapters of Matthew that an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph and gives him directions. Unlike the angel who appeared to Mary in Luke's gospel, this angel is not named. In fact, about the only point of similarity between the two accounts seems to be the message given by both angels to "fear not." Don't be afraid of what is happening. Don't be afraid to embrace Jesus. That is a good word for us all. Don't be afraid to enter into the incarnation story.

The angel is very specific to call Joseph the son of David. It was imperative that the Messiah came from the line of David. That was the whole point of the genealogy. But Joseph was not the biological father. Matthew is very clear on this point, changing up his wording in verse 16 to say, "Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah."

Remarkably, Joseph, like Mary, is obedient to the angel's words.

And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. (1:24-25)

Joseph took Mary as his wife and even kept her a virgin until she gave birth. Then he adopted the child and named the boy Jesus, as the angel had instructed. Giving the name was the responsibility of the legal father, and thus Jesus would be the son of David.

Even though the coming of Messiah was anticipated, the incarnation was surprising, unexpected, unforeseeable, and unpredictable. In order for Joseph to buy into the arrival of this king it took the intervention of an angel. Left to himself, Joseph would have dismissed Mary and sought to get on with his life.

I wonder if this scenario might not be more the norm than the exception. The birth of Jesus, the coming of the Messiah, was a one-time event. However, the incarnation, the coming of God into our world, life conceived by the Holy Spirit happens daily all around us. We long for God to come. We anticipate and pray for his arrival. This is why we come to church: we are hoping to hear personally from God, for him to speak into our lives.

But when incarnation occurs, we often don't recognize it. We may even reject it because it is not happening the way we had planned. It doesn't fit into our agenda or it is outside of our legal boundaries or social norms. We are untrained in spotting incarnation and recognizing it as the life of God in our midst. And often it takes the intervention of angels working through our night visions to open our eyes and believe

that the extraordinary life of God is being birthed once again in some small, obscure way.

As I look back on my life I see so many things that were totally unexpected, and yet I can see now how the greatest gifts came through unanticipated incarnation. Joseph believed the message from God and took on a pregnant woman and her unborn child at the suggestion of an angel. Are we ready to respond in kind? How is God speaking to us during this Advent season?

The account of the dream and Joseph's obedience is interrupted by Matthew's editorial comment.

Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US." (1:22-23)

The theme of Matthew's gospel is fulfillment, and here we find the first OT text in this gospel to validate Jesus as the Messiah who fulfilled Messianic prophecy. Many will recognize the reference to Isaiah 7:14, which came in the eighth century B.C. to faithless Judah and King Ahaz. The prophecy spoke of judgment and exile, but also of a time of restoration when a king would sit on the throne of David. Matthew has rightly understood Isaiah's prophecy, and this is why his genealogy draws attention to the exile.

The striking thing in this story is the two names, Jesus and Immanuel, given to the baby born to Mary and adopted by Joseph. Shakespeare asked, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Names are very significant. Names represent the hopes and dreams of parents, the context for a birth, or the connection to family lineage.

Last year my wife and I became grandparents, not just once but twice. The names of our two grandsons are very meaningful to us: Samuel Edward and Noah John. The first names are biblical characters pointing to redemption history and are meaningful to the conditions surrounding the births. The middle names are meaningful to me beyond words. The first boy born into the Hanneman family during the past 80 years carries the name Edward. My grandfather was Edward Hanneman, my father Ralph Edward, and my son is John Edward. As far as Noah John goes, well, there's no need to say anything more.

The boy born to Mary was to be given the name Jesus because he would save his people from their sins. Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua or Yeshua. It means "Yahweh (the Lord) is salvation or "Yahweh saves." The wording of the angel's message in verse 21 is actually very close to Isaiah 7:14. But the angel digresses and also quotes from Psalm 130:

If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins,

O Lord, who could stand?

**But with you there is forgiveness;
therefore you are feared...**

**O Israel, put your hope in the LORD,
for with the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption.**

**He himself will redeem Israel
from all their sins. (Ps 130:3-4, 7-8 NIV)**

The name Jesus points to the baby's mission. Jesus would teach, heal, and disciple, but his primary purpose was to redeem "his" people, both Jews and Gentiles, through the sacrifice of his body and the shedding of his blood.

The question was, How would Israel be saved through the exile? Their hope was to rest on a son born to a virgin, to the Messiah from the line of David. The question today remains the same. What is our hope in the darkness and evil of a world filled with terrorism, crime, pollution, and greed? What is our hope for redeeming our own deceitful and sinful hearts? Our hope is in the baby Jesus, in the incarnation. Jesus has saved us from our sins.

In some major cities one can observe a building downtown, right next to the local skid row. On the front of the building hangs a neon sign that says "Jesus Saves." Isn't that the point? Isn't that what matters most? We are the saved people of God. Christmas is the time to remember that God himself is our salvation.

The second name is Immanuel, which Matthew rightly translates as "God with us." Matthew frames his entire gospel with this thought, because in the last verse Jesus tells his disciples, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (28:20 NIV).

God is not only for us, he is with us. This is what John says in his gospel, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (1:14). God himself moved into the neighborhood. Matthew makes a slight change from the LXX reading of Isaiah's prophetic word. Instead of "you will call," he writes, "they will call" his name Immanuel. The people who find forgiveness and salvation in Jesus will be the ones who call him "God with us." There is no greater blessing than having God dwell in the midst of his people.

Listen to these words from Henri Nouwen:

By calling God Immanuel, we recognize that God is committed to live in solidarity with us, to share our joys and pains, to defend and protect us, and to suffer all of life with us. God-with-us is a close God, a God whom we call our refuge, our stronghold, our wisdom, and, even more intimately, our helper, our shepherd, our love. We will never really know God as a compassionate God if we do not understand with our heart and mind that God came and lived among us and with us.¹

God is here right now in our midst. "Whenever two or three gather," He is with us. He is with you. We are never alone, never forsaken. Christmas is the time to remember that our God is with us.

What's in a name? Everything! Yeshua and Immanuel: This baby born to two young people who heard the voice of God and obeyed became God's salvation and God's presence. It is the name that is above every name that we adore during Advent and Christmas.

The last verse of the Christmas carol *O Little Town of Bethlehem* says it well:

O holy Child of Bethlehem!
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in;
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel.

1. Henri Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2006), 74.