



HOW CAN THIS BE?

SERIES: ADVENT 2018

Matthew 1:18-25

Second Message

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In our four-week Advent series we are considering Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus through the lens of four questions: who, how, where and whence? Last week we looked at the "who" question. Who is this child? He is Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. He is born into Israel's story, a 3-stage story of rise, fall and flat line. A story of promise and fulfillment followed by loss and stagnation. A story of "ought-to-be" degenerating into a failed "is." But Matthew announces a new turning point. There is hope that things *can* be different. The Messiah is come, the one who will fulfill the promises to Abraham and to David, the one who will bring an end to exile and bring his people home. The one who offers a "can be" beyond the "is."

Many of you told me how helpful these concepts were for understanding not only Israel's history but also our own circumstances. The three-stage chart of rise, fall and flat line. The four words ought, is, can and will: what *ought* to be, what actually *is*, what *can* be, and what ultimately *will* be. And many of you were moved by the example of the *kintsukuroi* pot, the Japanese art of repairing a broken pot with gold-infused lacquer so that the repaired pot is even more beautiful than the original. The pot's brokenness is not hidden but is displayed in a context of renovation.

It is one thing to repair a broken pot using gold-infused lacquer, but how are broken people repaired? How can we move beyond the "is" to the "can be"? How can Israel move beyond its failed history? It *ought* to be the new humanity, a light to the other nations. But it had become just like all the other nations. How can there be a people that is for the good of the world? And how can humanity move beyond its failure? It *ought* to represent God on earth. Instead it lives without reference to God and often in outright hostility to God. How can any human or people succeed where Adam and Israel failed? If there is any hope, how can this be?

How can this child announced by Matthew be any different? And how can he even be born? At the end of the genealogy Matthew had broken the pattern. Instead of writing, "Jacob fathered Joseph, and Joseph fathered Jesus from Mary," he wrote, "Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ" (1:16). Unlike all previous generations, Joseph did not father Jesus by Mary. Jesus was born of Mary, but Joseph was not the father. How can this be?

So today we address the "how" question. How can this be? How can Jesus be born if Joseph is not his father? How can the broken pots of damaged lives be repaired so that they are even more beautiful than the original? We will find that the answer to these two questions is the same.

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 consid-

ered 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. (Matt 1:18-25 ESV)

The New Testament gives us two quite different accounts of the birth story of Jesus. Matthew's account is brief, just these eight verses; Luke's is much longer. Luke tells his story primarily from Mary's perspective; Matthew from Joseph's perspective.

The story begins with a wedding—or almost does. Mary was betrothed to Joseph but they had not yet come together. Betrothal was quite different from our modern practice of engagement. A girl was of marriageable age as soon as she went through puberty. She transitioned from young girl to marriageable maiden. Her parents would seek to marry her off as soon as possible. The key figure in the wedding process was not the mother of the bride, but the father of the groom, seeking a bride for his son. First came betrothal, a solemn ceremony binding the man to the maiden. The girl would be just past puberty, perhaps 12 or 13. The man was usually 10 to 15 years older. After betrothal the maiden carried on living with her family, while the man returned to his father's house to prepare a place for his future family. A betrothal was much more binding than an engagement today. Though the couple did not yet share bed and board, they were legally bound together: he was hers and she was his. Breaking the betrothal was divorce.

About a year later the groom would return to the girl's house, the two would be formally married, the groom's father would throw a big banquet, the groom would bring his wife home and the marriage would be consummated. You might recognize some of this imagery in various Biblical passages.

Joseph and Mary were in this in-between stage, betrothed but not yet consummated. But Mary was found to be with child. Oh no! This was a serious matter. This was a capital offense. Biblical law was clear on the matter. If a man lay with a betrothed maiden in a city, both were to be killed by stoning; if he lay with her in the open country, she was given the benefit of the doubt but he was to be killed. If a man raped an unbetrothed maiden, then he must give her father 50 shekels and she became his wife. Some countries in the Middle East and North Africa are only now beginning to repeal similar laws allowing rapists to marry their victims.

Mary is found to be pregnant. This would have been terrifying for her and devastating for Joseph. But Matthew gives us the readers some privileged information so that we don't get too alarmed: Mary is found to be pregnant *of the Holy Spirit*. But Joseph, in the story, does not know this.

He is now in a quandary. Matthew describes him as righteous and as not wanting to publicly shame Mary. How can he reconcile these two? Being "righteous" or "just" normally means being faithful to Torah, to Israel's law. For example, Luke describes Zechariah and Elizabeth as "both righteous before God, walking blameless in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord" (Luke 1:6). The commandment was clear. Mary should be brought out and exposed; she should confess before the community what happened, and identify the man. The community would then decide whether this happened in the city or in the countryside; whether only the man should die or also the maiden. But Joseph wanted to spare her this public humiliation; he had compassion on her.

How could he reconcile righteousness and compassion, justice and mercy? He wished to be righteous but also compassionate. He resolved the tension by deciding to divorce her quietly. The families would agree to terminate the betrothal. Mary would be spared public shame, but life would not be easy for her. She would be secluded at home, where months later she would bear the child. But she would be damaged goods. Remember, she's only 12 or 13.

This was not an easy situation for Joseph. In the next verse Matthew tells us that Joseph was still considering these things. Let's take a moment to think on him. In Western depictions of the Nativity, Joseph is usually portrayed standing passively behind Mary. But Eastern renditions of the Nativity show Joseph in the foreground, sitting on the ground, pondering these things. "Pondering" or "considering" is a rather tame translation. Matthew uses a closely related verb in the next chapter to describe Herod flying into a rage when he saw that he had been tricked by the magi (2:16). Just as Herod was full of passion, so was Joseph. True, it was a different sort of passion. Herod's passion was vengeful fury born of paranoia. Joseph's passion was anguish born of tension between doing right and being compassionate. Herod didn't have that problem: he was neither just nor merciful. Joseph was trying to be both at the same time. I'm sure he was agitated: how can this be?

Meanwhile, over in the Luke story, Mary had asked the same question. It can be dangerous to ask this question. An angel appeared to Zechariah and told him that his wife Elizabeth would bear him a son, despite her being barren and them both being old. "How shall I know this?" he asked, "for we are both old." How can this be? He was struck dumb for asking this question, for it indicated a lack of faith. Where God's angel had just made a wonderful promise, Zechariah saw only obstacles.

The angel Gabriel told Mary that she too would conceive and bear a son. She too asked, How can this be? "How will this be, since I've not known a man?" She knew that she had not been with any man. Her question was taken as an innocent one, and the angel gave her an explanation: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35).

But Joseph does not know this. How can this be? His is an agonized question, though it is never spoken aloud. His thoughts are in tumult. What ought to be a happy time of hope and anticipation has become shattered; *ought* has become *is*. How could she do this? Who

did this to her? His mind is in turmoil, torn between the requirements of the Law and his compassion for her.

As he is wrestling with his thoughts, his emotions, his passions, an angel appeared to him. "Joseph, son of David, fear not." Yes, Mary is pregnant and will bear a son, but that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. Here we are drawn into the mystery of the incarnation. That which is conceived is "in her" but at the same time it is "from the Holy Spirit." The four women of the genealogy have somewhat prepared the way. Judah fathered Perez and Zerah *from Tamar*; Salmon fathered Boaz *from Rahab*; Boaz fathered Obed *from Ruth*; David fathered Solomon *from Uriah's wife*. Now it's not Joseph fathered Jesus *from Mary*, but that which is conceived is *in* Mary but *from* the Holy Spirit.

Joseph had no part in the conception of the child that is now growing within Mary's womb. But now he does have a part to play. The angel gives him two assignments. "Don't be afraid," the angel says, the most common command in Scripture, as our most natural response to so many situations is to be afraid. Take Mary as your wife. Don't divorce her, as you were planning to do. Instead, go ahead and bring her into the home you have prepared.

His second assignment is to name the son: "you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Joseph's naming will establish his legal paternity, and hence Jesus's place within the lineage of David. The name itself explains an important element of his identity, the "who?" of 1:1. He is Jesus the Christ or Messiah, *Yeshua ha-Mashiach*. Yeshua, the Hebrew original of the name Jesus, was a common name of the first century. It's a name with an inspirational meaning and an illustrious namesake. Its fuller form Yehoshua means Yahweh is salvation, the Lord is salvation. It was the name of Joshua. At the heart of the name is the verb *yasha*, to save. In the Old Testament salvation was physical. The Lord saved his people from their enemies: from the Egyptians, from the Philistines. Surely now he would save his people from the current enemy, the Romans. Each boy named Yeshua represented the hopes and dreams of his parents: surely now would be a good time for the Lord to come and save his people.

The Jews were looking for God to save them, but not from their sins. He had already provided that. They knew they were sinners, and they understood that the exile had happened because of Israel's sin. But there was a mechanism for dealing with sin: the system of sacrifices in the temple. Every single day for over a thousand years, two lambs had been offered on the altar, one in the morning and one in the evening, as a burnt offering for the collective sinfulness of the entire people. And many other animals were offered up each day for the sins of individuals. These many types of sacrifices are described in Leviticus; after each one comes the refrain, "So the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin, and he shall be forgiven." Their sins were dealt with, albeit temporarily, for they would inevitably sin again. The sacrifices couldn't solve that problem, the propensity to sin. Neither the system of sacrifices nor the Law could transform their lives, reversing this propensity to sin, transforming them from the inside out. The Jews were looking for salvation, but it was from their enemy and occupier, the Romans.

The angel announces that Jesus would save "his people." One would think this is Israel. But as you read through Matthew's gospel, it becomes clear that Jesus is redefining who his people are. His people are those who accept his invitation to come to him with their burdens and weariness and find rest. His people are those who gather

around him, those who follow him, those who accept the call to identify with him. These are the people whom he will save from their sins.

This conception, birth and naming is all in fulfillment of the Scriptures: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Isa 7:14). As we saw in the genealogy, Jesus comes into Israel’s history in order to fulfill it. Again we encounter the mystery of the incarnation: Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. Heaven and earth are met together. He is sent from the bosom of God. He not only represents God’s presence on earth, he is God’s presence on earth. The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.

When Joseph awoke, he did what the angel had commanded him. He took Mary as his wife, and he named the child. In Matthew’s Nativity story Joseph never speaks, not a word. Instead, he acts. He does exactly what the angel tells him to do. His actions demonstrate that he is indeed a righteous man, living in accordance with God’s word. He is like Noah, also described as a righteous man, who never speaks during the Flood narrative, but lives out his righteousness by doing all that God commanded him to do.

The actual birth of Jesus is covered in just a few words: “she gave birth to a son” (only two words in Greek). The actual birth of Jesus is not Matthew’s focus. Instead, his focus is the conception: it is *in* Mary but it is *of* the Holy Spirit. How can there be any hope of a new beginning? Because that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

How can this be? Western art shows Mary innocently asking this question. Perhaps some of you can identify with her; asking the question from a quiet, non-agitated heart. But probably more of us can identify with Joseph as shown in Eastern art: Joseph sitting on the ground puzzling, passionately agitated, wrestling with his conflicting impulses—in his case, of being righteous versus being compassionate. How can this be? asked Mary innocently. From the Holy Spirit. How can this be? fumed Joseph passionately. The same answer: from the Holy Spirit.

Here at PBCC we have four family values that express what we feel it means to be a church: Life in the Spirit, Devotion to the Word, Discipleship through Relationships, and Participation in God’s Work. The first of our four Family Values is “Life in the Spirit.” What do we mean by this? And what or who is the Holy Spirit?

In a phrase, the Holy Spirit is God’s Empowering Presence; it is God at work. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The initial state of the earth was blank: it was formless and void, lacking structure and content, lacking functionality and functioning. There was only darkness and the deep. But the Spirit of God was there, ready to bring order and to fill when God spoke. God brought order and life through his Word and through his Spirit. When God undid creation in the Flood, he sent his Spirit-wind to initiate a new creation, to bring new order and new life. In the Old Testament God’s Spirit came upon certain individuals to equip them for a specific task. The first so filled were the artists and craftsmen whom God filled with his Spirit so they could make him a sanctuary in which he could dwell among his people. God himself gave the enabling so his people could do his work. But both Adam and Israel failed to live up to their mission: to be God’s faithful representative. Since they have both failed, what hope is there for any human to live up to God’s intentions. How can this be?

Through his Holy Spirit, God conceives life within the virgin’s womb; one who will be faithful, the man from heaven, the second Adam, the true son of Abraham and true son of David. When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit of God descended upon him and God said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17). How was Jesus able to faithfully discharge his public ministry, beginning with forty days of temptation? By the Holy Spirit.

In the final verse of Matthew Jesus promised his disciples, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20). Forty days after being raised, Jesus ascended into heaven, there to take his seat at God’s right hand. His work was done. But Jesus had promised, “I am with you always.” How can this be? Again the same answer: from the Holy Spirit. Ten days after the ascension, the Spirit descended on the day of Pentecost. God began his ongoing work through the Spirit. The church was born from the Spirit. The church expanded from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth through the impetus of the Spirit. Jesus is God with us, Emmanuel. The Spirit is also God with us.

What does it mean to be a Christian? Is it simply making a decision to ask Jesus into our hearts, and that’s it? Or is it a matter of believing the right things, saying the Apostles’ Creed? The Christian life is about accepting God’s call to participate in his story in Christ and through his Spirit. We accept his invitation to be the beneficiaries of what he has done in Christ and what he is continuing to do through his Spirit. Through his Spirit God sent his Son into the world, born of a woman but conceived of God. Jesus the Christ lived a life of complete faithfulness; he died, was buried, rose again, and ascended to glory. God invites us to participate in this resurrection life. In the iconography of our window, the Spirit mediates the life of the resurrected Lamb, now enthroned in heaven above, to people on earth below.

The Spirit is God’s life-giving empowering presence among us. How can broken pots be repaired and renewed? Through the Holy Spirit? How can broken lives be restored, even transformed? Through the Spirit. Through his Spirit God shines light into our darkness, order into our disorder. There is no life so damaged that God through his Spirit cannot heal. People are often excited about the dramatic manifestations of the Spirit: healings, tongues, prophecies. God is able to miraculously heal, and he does heal in ways that defy medical explanation. But that healed human body is still destined to die, for our outer self is wasting away. We are mortal. Our outer selves are earthen vessels, jars of clay. More amazing than a temporary healing of our mortal body is the permanent transformation of our inner self. How can this be? How can we be transformed? Again, it is through the Spirit. It is “Life in the Spirit,” which really means the life of God in us through his Spirit. In our broken selves we do the works of the flesh: indulgent sins of sexual immorality, impurity and sensuality; interpersonal sins of enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions; and a host of things like these. But there is hope; we can become different people. How can this be? Through the Spirit. As the Spirit works within us we show the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal 5:22-23).

The first Sunday of Advent is about Hope. Who is this child that is born? He is Jesus the Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. This second Sunday of Advent is about Peace, about shalom. How is this child conceived? Of the Holy Spirit. Jesus came to establish shalom, wholeness. Through his Spirit he brings shalom, wholeness and flourishing to his people. We flourish in ourselves individually as

our warring passions are brought under the control of the Spirit; our disordered affections are brought into order. We flourish among ourselves as our unhealthy relationships are transformed. We flourish in the world as we act for the good of the world. How is this possible? Through the Holy Spirit. The same God who was at work in Christ continues to be at work in us through his Spirit. God's design is that we flourish with respect to ourselves, with respect to one another, and with respect to the world.

Growing up I got to see this happen with lepers. My parents both worked with lepers as missionaries in Thailand. Lepers were outcasts; most would look at them and see obstacles and reasons why they are not worth paying attention to. But the missionary nurses like my mother went to them; they touched them and treated their wounds and told them of Jesus who cared for lepers. So many lepers came to faith that my father started a Bible School for them. These broken people became flourishing people to the praise of God's grace. Where some would see only obstacles others saw opportunities for grace and new life.

This is the reason that people from our body go down to the high-security prison in Soledad. Many would see obstacles as to why God couldn't work in this prison, but others see opportunities for God to be at work through his Spirit. There are wide open doors to go in and tell the inmates about a God who loves, a God who sent his Son to bring about change, a God who sends his Spirit to bring about change. A PBCC team went in three weeks ago and again yesterday to share that there is a God of Hope, a God of Peace and shalom, who through his Spirit can reach even into the darkness of the prison to shine light.

How can all this be? Because of the answer that God's angel gave to Mary, and that God's angel gave to Joseph: it is from the Holy Spirit. God wants to make us different people, and he does so through his Spirit.

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