

Matthew 1:18-25
Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 21, 2025

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Having been prepared throughout Advent by the forerunner's call to repentance in anticipation of news of the Christ's arrival, it's now time to consider the wonderful mystery of the incarnation itself. We've meditated upon this quite a bit in the Advent midweek series, but you might say our focus has been on the theology of it... whereas our text points to a very practical explanation: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way." So let's consider from a plain reading of Matthew's account that the birth of Christ took place "in this way" ... that there was a plan about it.

We probably much prefer hearing the quite beautiful account in St Luke, in which the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and explains everything to her in the most heavenly terms – that her son will be called "the Son of the Most High" and that he will be given the throne of David and will reign forever and of his kingdom there will

be no end, all to which Mary beautifully responds with great faith, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Yes, we rather love that account in Luke.

Matthew’s account, focused on Joseph, is perhaps less able to be romanticized: it may seem less dramatic, less able to be sung of with beautiful “glorias” and to describe Gabriel with “wings as drifted snow, with eyes as flame” and to celebrate the “most highly favored lady.”

Nevertheless, these accounts should not be contrasted, but compared – perfect symmetry with one another, for example in (1) the angel’s mysteriously wonderful news of the Gospel promise coming to pass, (2) in both cases, the faithful servant’s response, and (3) even the focus of both accounts on *Mary*, not Joseph ... notice how our text from Matthew begins: “The birth of Jesus Christ happened this way: *When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph*” ... that may seem an odd beginning because this Gospel to the Jews would look through the lens of the man (even does in the preceding genealogy, from Abraham to David to Joseph)... and yet, here the account of the Christ’s birth begins with “his mother Mary” – to show the incarnation is by the work of the Holy Spirit (not the work of Joseph), that *the virgin* shall conceive and bear a son, Jesus, who will save his people from their sins.

So, whether Luke’s account or Matthew’s, whether the angel’s message to Mary or to Joseph, the news and its meaning are

the same. But, as much as we love this news, and as much as we love the account of this Annunciation of the Incarnation, how certainly must we admit that it declares our unrighteousness just as clearly as it declares our salvation. For, by detailing how the birth of Christ came to be and how the incarnation divinely happened by the work of the Holy Spirit, it also makes plain to what great lengths our Lord had to go to bring the Savior into the world because he could not use the line of sinful Adam. Not even Joseph – called a “just man” in our text – had the ability to bring a sinless son and perfect substitute into the world. Of course, this child was more than a sinless son, for – to save us – he needed to be God himself sharing human likeness; but he could not share our *sinful* human likeness and, so, the conception had to be no work of flesh through God’s normal plan of procreation, but a special plan of God.

In other words, the virgin conceiving and bearing a son may have truly been a sign – that sign promised faithless Ahaz some 750 years prior (as we heard in our Old Testament reading) – but it was more than a sign that this Child was the Christ. Consider this: if it was only the supposed chief sign of the Christ, why – when John the Baptist asked Jesus if he was the Christ – why didn’t Jesus just respond, “Well, look who my mother is! I was born of the virgin.” In *that* moment, He pointed to ‘the deeds of the Christ’ as the sign. And when the angels told the shepherds where to find the Christ Child, they didn’t say, “Go look for the virgin mother.” They said,

“This shall be a sign unto you, you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.” So, is the prophecy of the virgin birth a sign of the Christ, as mentioned in Isaiah? Absolutely; and we love it for the sign that it is! But, is that the *fullness* of its purpose? No; it was a *necessity*!

It was a necessity, for the sin-stains of the Fall had a death grip on humanity, so that the Christ had to enter the world in a divine manner – the seed not of the man, but of the woman – to outsmart Sin’s reach.

This raises the question for many who are confused by heterodox teaching: How can one *not* confess the doctrinal truth of original sin, that we are conceived sinful... how can false preachers get away with teaching that man is born in ‘neutrality’ and must make his decision for Jesus, or even born righteous until he first consciously chooses sin? How can such teachings convince people of such transparent contradiction and misuse of the Holy Scriptures, when the very sign that the child is the Christ is that He escapes the grip of Sin on Adam’s line through the conception by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary?

But, lest we simply wag our heads at such dangerous teaching or those duped by it, let us ask ourselves: If we *recognize* Sin’s grip on all of humanity – so that Christ must enter the world through such extraordinary means – then how can that ‘theological truth’ not also be admitted in our daily lives? When a spouse or

parent or pastor or other authority needs to call us to repentance, are we suddenly embarrassed by such a claim that we might actually *be* sinners in daily life, as we say we are on Sunday mornings? Are we suddenly defensive, defiant, despondent, determined to prove to one another our righteousness? Then, why didn't the Christ just come through *our* family line, if we're so perfect... if we are so above the call to repentance in daily life and the daily practice of it (because it's daily there!)? Or, to say it the other way: if Christ couldn't come through our family line for eternal life, then we too have reason to recognize our sin in daily life.

The incarnation of the Christ may be an act of him 'humbling himself,' the Scriptures say, but it is also a very humbling truth regarding our sinful state. There is simply no family line that can be defended as having earned favor with God... not even the line of Abraham could say the Christ came *naturally* from its line.

You see, it all comes together, doesn't it? – John called all sinners to repentance because all are under the curse (original sin!): "When all the world was cursed by Moses' condemnation," we sing. That's not just true in overarching theological platitudes and terminology like "original sin." It's true of us as we look in the mirror, as we examine ourselves in daily life; it's true as we come to the house of God meditating on what we have to offer Him to show him we're good folk – *nothing*: "I a poor miserable sinner." When considered not just in theory, but in the incarnate reality of the

Christ's own conception and its need to avoid the fallen line of man... when considered through *that* lens, what a lost and condemned and miserable state we were *conceived and born into* and, if Old Adam is allowed to rule the day, what a lost state we ourselves *exhibit* in daily life!

And yet, this is exactly the depth of meaning in the Savior's given name: "You shall name him Jesus, for he shall save His people *from their sins*." In short, he came to save us from us. But not by rescuing Old Adam, but by mastering him, condemning him, and destroying him... and giving us new birth in the adoption of sons that looks forward to the eternal inheritance this Christ has procured for us upon the cross.

And that's what makes this text so beautiful... that the angel could say to Joseph just as the angel (likely the same one, though not *named* Gabriel in this text) said to Mary: "Do not be afraid. Fear not, Joseph, to hold fast to your marriage and retain your wife, for this is no embarrassing work of sin and darkness. This is the work of God Most High. Indeed, this is the *long-awaited* work of God Most High. The Christ is here... call his human name Jesus, for it confesses to every person of every generation that this one conceived and born of the virgin shall save his people from their sins."

Two quick points ought be made here: first, that God used the marriage estate to bring His Christ into the world. The two sinners in that estate may be subject to the Fall, but the divinely

marriage estate is not; even God Himself honors it by including it in the coming of Christ into the world (remember, they were already married according to Jewish custom... which is why Joseph seeks to “divorce” Mary quietly). So God includes marriage in bringing the Christ into the world. Thus, we should always honor and revere the marriage estate. Likewise (second quick point), we should always respect the truth that the prophecy says that the virgin shall *conceive and bear* a son... not just *conceive* a son, not just *bear* a son. The two belong together, so that the angel tells Joseph, “that which is *conceived* in her... she will *bear*.” They are forever the bookends of God’s natural design to bring a child into the world, and no abortion-loving society can morally define them apart, as if the bookend need not include the second.

Thus, Joseph, faithful Joseph, knowing his duty to honor marriage and care for this divine child and His mother, Joseph did as the angel of the Lord commanded. Is that ending any less beautiful than the confession of Mary, “let it be to me according to your word.” If she ought be held in high esteem for such faithful participation in the Lord’s mysterious plans, ought not Joseph have similar honor among *men*?... a role model for all men, for he questioned not the messenger of God, but recognized the holy Word and truth the messenger proclaimed, and he dedicated his daily life to be lived faithful to the charge given him by God Most High, even down to safeguarding and ensuring the child be rightly *named*: Jesus.

Jesus: for He will save His people from their sins. Or, as prophesied through Isaiah: Immanuel – God with us. It’s beneficial to meditate upon those two names *now* because we as a congregation (many of our sister congregations) do not currently practice the custom of gathering to observe the Naming of Jesus on the eighth day of Christmas. But it’s also beneficial to meditate on those two names *now* because they are intimately tied to the incarnation. Without *the Christ* becoming man, where do either of those names have any meaning at all? And yet, because the virgin conceived and bore *the Son of God*, are not those names abundantly meaningful in proclaiming our everlasting life?

And, in the same breath, are those two names not completely synonymous? For, the One who saves us from our sins, sin which separated us from God, that One thereby reunites us with God, so that we may forever be *with* God, and God *with* us.

Thus, salvation is not merely that we have been loosed from bondage, but that we may forever dwell with God. Or, as the Small Catechism says, “that I may be his own”... hear that? “That I *may be* his own”... I *get* to; you *get* to... we get to be *with* Christ – the peaceful joy of a free and clear conscience because He saved us from our sins... we get to be His own and “live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.” Yes, to be saved is not to no longer *need* Christ or see any

remaining value in a Savior. To be saved is to forever be *with* God and God *with* us and – thus, our one mediator between God and man – this Jesus is indeed Immanuel, God *with* us.

And that is a breathtaking reality, considering that we just said a few moments ago that he could not be of the line of Adam so as to be free from the death-grip of original sin. So then, if this One who needed to be *outside* the Fall could nevertheless come with a name that says God now forever dwells *with* us because he has saved his people from their sins, then we ought understand that phrase “from their sins” to also include “from their sin”... that deep, dark, death-grip of Original Sin. He has saved us even from that curse that so overwhelmed the line of Joseph and David and Abraham and Adam... He has so saved us from Sin that, in Christ, we are now declared not just forgiven of particular sins, but we are declared “just” and “righteous” before God in heaven and may appeal with a clear conscience to that status in Christ and His righteousness, as we live in the inheritance of a new creation... a new creation not stained by the Fall and Original Sin... but one in which righteousness dwells.

Thus, Mary is the most highly favored *lady*; and Joseph is the model of faithfulness for every *man*. But, you are as blessed as they, for you too are the *beneficiary* of the wondrous mystery that the Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary... you are the beneficiary of the prophecy and sign once fulfilled in history, that the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name Jesus shall

forever proclaim to you that you have been saved from your sin and
forever may live in the joy and comfort and clear conscience of God
with us.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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