

A Son to Raise as His Own

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in the four-part Advent Series

December 15, 2013

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Matthew 1:18-5; 2:13-23 (Common English Bible)

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. ²⁰As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²²Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

²³Look! A virgin will become pregnant and
give birth to a son,

And they will call him, Emmanuel.

(Emmanuel means "God with us.")

²⁴When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife. ²⁵But he didn't have sexual relations with her until she gave birth to a son. Joseph called him Jesus.

[Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem, where the infant Jesus is born, worshipped by the Magi, and hunted by Herod]

¹³When the magi had departed, an angel from the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up. Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod will soon search for the child in order to kill him." ¹⁴Joseph got up and, during the night, took the child and his mother to Egypt. ¹⁵He stayed there until Herod died. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: I have called my son out of Egypt.

¹⁶When Herod knew the magi had fooled him, he grew very angry. He sent soldiers to kill all the children in Bethlehem and in all the surrounding territory who were two years old and younger, according to the time that he had learned from the magi. ¹⁷This fulfilled the word spoken through Jeremiah the prophet:

¹⁸A voice was heard in Ramah,
weeping and much grieving.

Rachel weeping for her children,
and she did not want to be comforted,
because they were no more.

¹⁹After King Herod died, an angel from the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt.

²⁰"Get up," the angel said, "and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel. Those who were trying to kill the child are dead." ²¹Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus ruled over Judea in place of his father Herod, Joseph was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he went to the area of Galilee. ²³He settled in a city called Nazareth so that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled: He will be called a Nazarene.

Being a father to our Lord and Savior has to be a unique vantage point!

Vantage point. For John, yet unborn himself, the birth of Jesus is an undiminished joy, for the baby is to be the long-awaited Davidic king, the very embodiment of hope. Herod's vantage point is a full 180 degrees from John's. For Herod, the baby is someone to be feared, a ruler who has come to turn the world upside down, to bring down the mighty and lift up the oppressed. This week, we come to Joseph who had every reason to see the baby as little more than a source of scandal, shame, and embarrassment. Yet, God can change our vantage point, enabling us to see the events around us from a kingdom-perspective.

Scandal in Nazareth

Nazareth was a Galilean village nestled in the hills north and west of the Sea of Galilee. It was not large in population, but neither was it a small circle of grass huts. Such villages are known to have had some industry that produced goods in excess of the

village's needs. And there were often people of means in these villages, as terraced homes have been found on some of the hillsides. But still, Nazareth was a quiet place and Joseph, probably a carpenter, lived a typically rural life broken up by time spent in the city of Sepphoris. Since trades tended to concentrate in families, Joseph and many of his male relatives would have been builders of one sort or another. A city the size and prominence of Sepphoris would have provided them with ample work. And the commute was short enough to enable them to come home in the evening. One can stand on a hill of Nazareth and see across the plain to Sepphoris, just a few miles away.

Joseph had become engaged to a young woman in the village. Joseph's betrothing to Mary was seriously undertaken and could be broken only in the most extreme of circumstances. In first-century Judaism, engaged couples were treated as husband and wife; unfaithfulness to the fiancé would be considered adultery and draw all the appropriate penalties under the Jewish law.

And now, Mary had turned up pregnant. There could be only one explanation. Mary had cheated on Joseph and brought great shame on him and his family. His mind could hardly land on the idea. Emotions swept through him from morn to night. And if he was honest with himself – the dominating emotion was anger. How could Mary have done this? And who was the father of her baby?

Everyone in the village understood that the punishment for adultery even extended to stoning (Deuteronomy 22:23-27). What could be better evidence of the crime than pregnancy? It was true that by this time the rabbis had lessened the penalty. Nonetheless, the punishments meted out were severe and humiliating. This is what lay ahead for the teenaged girl.

What to do? Joseph, the wronged fiancé, is a "righteous" (*diakos*) man (v. 19), which means that he lives by the law of Moses. He knows what punishments lay ahead for Mary. There would be every reason to expect that he would demand the full weight of the law and the community fall on this adulterer.

But Joseph makes no such demands. Instead, he makes plans to "dismiss her quietly," to "divorce" her and send her away from the shame and humiliation. In a word, Joseph extends mercy to the girl. This would not be in keeping with the letter of the law, but it would be in keeping with the heart of the law. This act of mercy from Joseph tells us much about the man. God chose a good man to be the earthly father to God's own son.

One dream changes everything

But in just one night's sleep, Joseph's vantage point would be forever changed. A messenger from God arrives to tell Joseph that Mary has been faithful to Joseph. The child she carries in her womb was "conceived by the Holy Spirit." The child is a boy and is to be named Yeshua, which means "God saves," (the name is "Joshua," or "*Iesous*" in the Greek, which is then brought into English as "Jesus"). This baby will be the long-awaited Savior of Israel, and hence, of the whole world. This baby will save the people from their sins (v. 21), restoring them to a right relationship with God in fulfillment of the prophets (v. 22-23). In essence, the angel (who is unnamed) shares with Joseph the heavenly vantage point. This young Galilean man can now see the truth that, perhaps, his heart had heard.

In his commentary on Matthew's gospel, Eugene Boring helps us to see that in this story of Joseph, Matthew points us to the new and higher righteousness of the kingdom (Matthew 5:20). Not a righteousness and justice built on rules-following, but justice grounded in the heart. Sadly, we modern readers of Matthew's story have little sense that Joseph's staying with Mary and becoming a father to this baby is a supreme act of love.

But Joseph's story doesn't end with his first act of mercy or even the birth of Jesus. Twice more an angel would come to him. An angel would warn Joseph to grab up his family and flee Bethlehem for Egypt, enabling them to escape Herod's slaughter of the

innocents. The angel tells them to stay in Egypt until Joseph is given the all-clear to return to Galilee. Then, some years later, an angel appears to Joseph in yet another dream. Herod has died and Joseph is to bring his family back to Israel. Joseph considers making a home for his family in Judea, but when that looks unsafe for them, he takes his family to Nazareth.

I've never studied how many times an angel of the Lord comes to a single person in the Bible, but three angelic visits has to be near the top of the list. Mary gets most of the attention at this time of year; after all, Mary was the "God-bearer," the *theotokos*. But we are told enough about Joseph to know that he occupied a unique vantage point. He was a righteous and kind man, who embraced his pregnant bride and made a home for his Lord. He would raise Jesus as his own.

The story of Joseph soon disappears from the gospels. We are told almost nothing about Jesus' upbringing and when he bursts onto the public scene, Joseph is not mentioned; presumably, he has died. But, we can look at the man Jesus and see something of Joseph in him. His kindness and mercy. His righteousness. His obedience to God. Mary was the right choice. And so too was Joseph.

"Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary"

These two phrases are taken from the Apostles Creed that we say each week during worship. They are best seen as two sides of a single coin – and that coin is Jesus. These two statements are claims that Jesus is divine ("conceived by the Holy Spirit") and human ("born of the Virgin Mary"). Truly God and truly human.

These claims proved to be some of the most contentious among Christians in the first centuries after Jesus' death and resurrection. Some claimed that Jesus was the person closest to God, even the most God-like, but not really and truly God. Others claimed that he only appeared to be human, but wasn't really, truly human like you and me.

These controversies raged across the Christian communities in the early centuries and gave rise to the great creeds, for such questions lie at the heart of our beliefs about the Trinitarian nature of God. If Jesus is truly God, then aren't there two Gods, but then again, aren't we monotheistic – and so on. You can imagine the late night discussions and mental headaches that arose from such questions.

The great Christian confessions, including the UMC Statement of Faith, uphold two inseparable natures, divine & human, in one person, Jesus – sort of two "whats" and one "who."¹ How can this be? Trying too hard to answer that question has led inevitably to distortions of Jesus and of the Gospel.

The great cloud of witnesses to the Good News urges us to stay true to the full revelation of Scripture and avoid some understandable mistakes: don't deny the full and true divinity and humanity of Jesus; don't divide him into two persons; don't make him into some hybrid "God-man." Instead, embrace and proclaim the Jesus-Who-Is, not a Jesus of our own making, even if we can't penetrate all the mysteries of God.

¹ Using "what/nature" and "who/person," Jesus is two "whats" (two natures, human and divine) and one "who" (Jesus). We can speak of the Trinity as one "what" (a single divine nature) and three "whos" (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What if Jesus had not been born? Where would we be in the biblical story? Try to imagine the course of human history if there had been no Jesus.
2. In what ways do you see Christmas, and, hence, the Christ, changing the world? What would you say to someone who told that if Christmas were really a true story, the world would have more to show for it?
3. It is always tempting for us to reduce religion to rules-keeping; it just makes everything so much simpler. There are times when the "Christian thing to do" conflicts with the letter of the Bible. Do you agree? If so, how do we go about figuring out what actually is the Christian thing to do?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Matthew 1 Jesus' genealogy. Why do you think Matthew would begin in this way?	Tuesday, Luke 3:21-37 Luke's genealogy of Jesus. How does this differ from Matthew's? Why?
Wednesday, Luke 2:41-52 Joseph is only mentioned here as a "parent." Who is Jesus' father?	Thursday, Luke 10:57-62 The cost of discipleship
Friday, Luke 15:11-32 The parable of the merciful father	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Romans

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

This class will not meet on Dec 23 and 30

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Exodus

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

This class will not meet on Dec 24 and 31

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The current series:

***The Battle for Christmas:
The Real Story of Christmas in America***

Scott's New Book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*, is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.

Sermon Notes
