

Title: Jesus' Birth
Biblical Text: Matthew 1:18-25
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Matthew 1:18-25

18 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. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 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. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 23 "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). 24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Good morning y'all. My name is Aaron Sweeney, and I'm an elder here at Church in the Square.

Last week we began our advent series in Matthew. The first 17 verses of chapter 1 we looked at Jesus' family. And today we're looking at verses 18-25, as you just heard read aloud, which is the story of Jesus' birth.

When I was thinking and praying over this text around a month ago, the first thing that came to mind is how this story is one of the more widely known (or familiar) stories there is, as it relates to the Bible. The birth of Jesus, along with the story of Jesus' death and resurrection are arguably the most commonly known not just within the Church, but outside the church...Christmas and Easter. There's even the somewhat pejorative term "Chreasters" that gets thrown around to explain those who go to Church on those holidays and that's it. To be clear, I don't advocate for the use of it, and if that's the first time you've heard that term, feel free to forget it. And for those who've never set foot inside any Church, or corporate gathering of God's people, they've likely seen a nativity scene or two; very specific and set up in just the right way for every piece to be seen just right.

This familiarity with Jesus' birth story (whether shallow or not) initially presented a sort of pressure. What new thing is there to learn from a story that's familiar to so many? Heck, I just turned 33, so I've heard this story around that many times, at a minimum.

That's where God interjected pretty clearly in my thought process.

Somewhat ironically, it became clear that this familiarity might not be ideal. To be clear, familiarity isn't always a negative thing. It can be healthy, especially as we consider relationships right? Familiarity with another can produce a deeper relationship or understanding of one-another. On the other end of the spectrum though, as things become familiar, the unintended consequences can be that they become comfortable, that we can start to function on auto-pilot, where we gloss over details and don't take the time to sit in and possibly learn/experience

something new or different. With familiarity we can sometimes start functioning within this assumption that we know what there is to know.

And my hope today is that, with a story that seems so familiar, and that some of us could pretty much recite with decent accuracy...my hope is that we can look beneath the surface of that familiarity. That we might slow down and take our time as we consider this beautiful, awe inspiring, and counter-cultural story.

The way I'll do that today—with the Lord's help—is by looking at the intentionality of our God that is intrinsic to his being, and therefore intrinsic to this story. And then we'll consider what that means for us, as his body...to be intentional, in light of this story.

Prayer

The Story of Jesus' Birth is Intentional

Matthew 1.18-21

18 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. **19** And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

It's important to know that this text is written as if from the vantage point of Joseph. This is key to understanding the uniqueness of some of the details in this story. For example, in the latter part of verse 18 we're made to understand that Mary is carrying a "child from the Holy Spirit", and in verse 19 it seems like the

response to that, from Joseph, is to divorce Mary quietly. However, the next two verses are crucial in helping reveal a unique tension at play.

20 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. **21** She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

This is helpful in knowing that when Joseph finds out that Mary is carrying a child, he isn't aware that the child is from the Holy Spirit, that his name will be Jesus, and that he will “save his people from their sins”. Not until this dream happens, does he receive these details. Meaning Joseph, for some period of time (unknown to us) thinks that Mary has committed adultery. And so his response, in verse 19, to divorce Mary, actually makes a lot more sense.

Quick aside here for clarity. The word betrothed can be understood as how we might understand the word engaged. Except betrothal would've functioned as much more binding than engagement in our modern context. And in some ways it functions how we would understand marriage to function, in that even though they were betrothed, to end betrothal would be considered divorce.

Back to the response of Joseph to the optics of infidelity...can you imagine what Joseph must have felt in that moment before receiving the details from the angel in his dream? Hurt, confused, betrayed, angry? We can't know exactly, but that doesn't seem like a stretch right? And this is the first tension point within this specific text that's worth pausing at. Part of Jesus' birth story involves tension in the relationship between the earthly mother and father (Mary / Joseph). But not just

any tension...infidelity. Something that Joseph and Mary would've commonly understood to be punishable by death (Deut. 22).

Joseph's response then is one that is both practical, yet shows compassion. Verse 19 describes Joseph as just, but unwilling to put Mary to shame. *Just*, in that he is motivated to uphold the law in his decision to consider divorce, yet the willingness to do it quietly shows a compassionate understanding and application of the law. Now God could have made the timeline of the dissemination of this information so that there was no tension, confusion, frustration, but he didn't. Mary could've found this information out from Gabriel (in Luke chapter 1) and then Gabriel, or another messenger of God, could've informed Joseph right at that moment. Or Mary could've said to Gabriel, "Hey, please let Joseph know". But instead Joseph hears about Mary being pregnant, with no other details, as those are delayed. And if God is intentional, and purposeful in what he does, then it begs the question... why?

Because God wasn't just coming to this earth to be God, he was coming to be both God and take on full humanity...fully God and fully human (hypostatic union). And this is purposeful. Let's flip over to Hebrews 2.14-17...

14 Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, **15** and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. **16** For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. **17** Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make **propitiation** for the sins of the people.

Jesus needed to experience the fullness of sinful humanity in order to satisfy the wrath of God, against sin. Part of being human means sometimes you enter into a situation, or a community, or a family, and there's a bit of mess. Or in this case, unfortunate timing. And even that minute human experience was something God was willing to enter into.

Matthew 1.22-25

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

23 "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel"

(which means, God with us). **24** When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, **25** but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Matthew quotes directly from the prophet Isaiah in this last section. Isaiah 7.14 to be exact.

Now imagine Joseph waking up having just received this information. We're going to assume for the moment that the comma between "sleep" and "he" is doing some heavy lifting. Imagine the multitude of emotions Joseph would be experiencing. His wife to be, Mary, whom was likely setup with him by their parents (as was a very common custom) had cheated on him...or so he thought. Now he's aware that she hasn't, and not only that, but the child she's holding was conceived in her by the Holy Spirit, his name is Jesus (Immanuel)—and functionally speaking—this was going to be the one who "will save his people from their sins". Which, we might

read as simply *forgiveness of sins*, but to any first century Jew forgiveness of sin means the end of exile.

What joy and relief must Joseph be experiencing, and also some shock I'd guess, similar to how Mary was shocked. And in his faithfulness he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. And in verse 25 it notes that Joseph knew her not, meaning they didn't have sex with one another. That might seem like a random additional detail at the end of this section, but there's two things to mention...

1. It was common practice and expectation that the marriage would be made "official" by consummation.
2. Joseph was a good listener. To fulfill what the prophet Isaiah spoke (from the Lord), they couldn't consummate the marriage then. "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,". In order for the virgin birth to stay true, to stay consistent to the prophecy, and to fulfill that prophecy (word from God) Joseph needed to abstain.

God is Intentionally Counter Cultural

God is intrinsically intention. It's in his character. And he shows this in how counter cultural this birth of Jesus is.

- God chose to condescend himself, and be present on earth amidst sinful human kind.
- Not only did he humble himself to be with his creation on earth, but he took on flesh and experienced full humanity.
- He took the form of the most vulnerable of humans...a baby. And he could've just been a baby that popped up anywhere that was convenient, but no...

- He subjected himself to the growth that every baby goes through..In a mother’s womb. Needing the same nourishment every other baby needed to move towards the hopeful due date, that we can pretend the angel informed Mary and Joseph of, of course.
- As the birth was getting closer Mary and Joseph couldn’t find a typical (and more comfortable) place to stay, so they used a stable. A place that housed livestock amidst other animals.
- Jesus experienced the trauma of being birthed as every other baby experiences.
- Jesus, an infant baby, ends up being laid in a manger. Specifically, a trough where livestock ate their food, that was “cushioned” by some straw found in the stable.

No other god of any religion has done this. How incredibly counter cultural is our God, how counter cultural is Jesus. The one who would save his people from their sins, who would release them from exile, that he’d come *intentionally* in utter humility, vulnerability, inconvenience, relational tension, and family dysfunction (as Derec showed us last week).

This is the beauty of the incarnation. That is, the act of God humbling/condescending himself to take on human form in the body of Christ. And it’s the intentional humility, vulnerability, inconvenience, relational tension, etc. that characterizes the incarnation. Which, in turn, gives us a picture of what it looks like to live a life that reflects Christ. To live intentionally.

God’s People Will Live Intentionally (and Counter Culturally / Incarnationally)

In her book *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Marva Dawn hits on how embracing intentionality is a key piece of keeping, and honoring the Sabbath. That good and right intentionality means we care, and that our affections and desires are appropriate. She shares the following personal example...

“If I want to convey to guests in my home the message that they are treasured for who they are and not for what they do, it is important that I be intentional about not letting them work [or help, on the Sabbath].”

Though the context for that example is the Sabbath observance. Dawn isn't saying intentionality is unique to the Sabbath. She goes on to say...

“Such deliberateness goes against the grain of many Christian lives in twentieth-century [and twenty-first century] America. We so easily fall into the patterns and habits of the world around us in its outrageous lack of commitment that we rarely take time to consider how we do what we do.”

The incarnation has implications for God's people

Dawn is speaking broadly there, but I'd argue her critique is uniquely applicable to the advent season, and specifically the story of the birth of Jesus. A story that so many know, a holiday that so many celebrate, whether they believe Jesus is King or not. So how much more crucial to be intentional and deliberate in this season? For two reasons...

1. For the shaping of our own hearts. To experience the beauty of our God. To be in awe, and not just familiar who who Jesus is.

2. We're a people whom God has called to be set apart. Not physical, no. But set apart in that we reflect the love of God. The kind of love endures what he endured for the sake of others. The kind of love that people see and want to know more about.

Church in the Square, let's be intentional in this season. Let's be deliberate in this season. We serve a God who intentionally and deliberately loved us. His incarnation was intentional and deliberate down to the minute details. Would we be a people who are intentional in the details...in every aspect of our lives, and specifically in the advent season.

In other words...

- **Consumerism is not king.** It might satisfy you for a moment, but it will leave you exhausted and depleted.
- **Jesus is King.** He doesn't leave us exhausted and depleted. He says "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."
- **Sentimentality is not our savior.** In the moment it feels nice and cozy, but it will leave you wanting in the new year.
- **Jesus is our savior.** He satisfies for eternity, and doesn't leave you wanting. Instead he says to abide in him.

- “Jesus is the reason for the season” might be a true statement that’s easy to weaponize as a retort. However, it doesn’t display the intentional love that God shows us through the birth of Jesus Christ.
- Instead the same humility and love that God had in subjecting himself to a sinful world through the birth of his son Jesus, is the same humility and love we see present in John 13 when Jesus washes his disciples feet.

Conclusion

This season might bring you fun or excitement. It might bring you sorrow or pain. It might bring you anger or resentment. The reality is, the christmas tree, the lights, the cookies, the movies, and even the music...none of it brings lasting joy. None of it meets you where you are. None of it loves you and reminds you of your worth. Only Jesus does this beautiful work. His intentional and incarnational love is why the writer of Hebrews can say in chapter 4, verses 15 and 16...

14 Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Church in the Square. Take this advent season, and sit expectantly, but patiently. Don’t let familiarity get in the way of the truth and beauty of God’s word, and the story of his incarnation. And I hope that pours over you and moves you in a way only God, through his grace, can do.

Prayer