

Advent 4
December 18, 2016

“Pondering Matthew’s Account of Jesus’ Birth”

MATTHEW 1:18-25

T*his is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.” ²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

I can’t tell you enough what a privilege it is to be a pastor during this Christmas season. You see, dear Christians, I have the privilege of spending time preparing messages for Christmas for Kids, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and our worship service here this morning. This involves reading the Bible and pondering what God’s Word tells us about the birth of Jesus. This past week I had the privilege of spending time with these words just read to you from Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth. I invite you now to join me in going through these verses and pondering what they mean for us.

“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.” The birth of Jesus came about. It happened. This past year over 4 million babies were born in this country. Each birth is really a miracle and each birth involves special moments for those who seeing a child come into this world. You remember one birth because of the long hard labor involved. You remember another birth because it was so easy. You remember another because of the emergency surgery needed. You remember yet another because it was totally unexpected. Of all the children ever born, none can compare to the birth of Jesus. The very eternal Son of God became a child in the womb of Mary. “The Word became flesh.”

Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, the carpenter from Nazareth. That means they were engaged to be married. Even though they were engaged to be married they did not have relations with each other. I recently read that the NFL quarterback for the San Diego Chargers, Philip Rivers is very religious. He and his wife did not have relations with each other until after they were married. There was no seed of a man involved in the conception that took place in the womb of Mary.

Matthew tells us how the child was conceived. “She was found to be with child through the

Holy Spirit." Don't you like that expression "she was found to be with child?" A few years ago a couple in Northern California found a rusty old tin can underneath an oak tree on the property they had just purchased. Much to their surprise it was filled with gold coins and there were several rusty cans filled with gold coins. They never found how they got their so they were able to keep the gold. Mary was found to be with child. We know how they baby Jesus came into her womb. He was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit.

The angel Gabriel told Mary that she would be with child and give birth to a son and she was to give him the name Jesus. She then asked, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" The angel Gabriel told her these amazing words, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." The Old Testament prophet Isaiah predicted that a virgin would give birth to a son and his name would be called Immanuel (God with us). We never cease to be amazed at what a miracle this truly is. We confess it with the words of the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed, "I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit." Just as the Holy Spirit hovered over the waters of creation so the Holy Spirit hovered over the womb of Mary and brought forth the miraculous conception of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now our attention is drawn to Joseph. **"Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly."** Joseph was a righteous man. He was a good man. How hard it was to hear the words from his future wife Mary that she was pregnant with a child. Who was the real father of this child? He does not accept the words that she told him about a visit from an angel and the child being conceived by the Holy Spirit. He does not accept what she says about giving birth to the very Son of God. He shows his unbelief by his desire to just divorce her privately and not expose her to public disgrace.

I recently read that according to the Pew Research Center over 75% of people in this country believe that Jesus was born of a virgin. Yet only 55% plan to attend religious services around Christmas. People may say they believe in the virgin birth, yet it does not impact and mold and shape their lives. It doesn't really enter into their thinking and view of life.

We think of others who refused to accept the miraculous such as Abraham's wife Sarah. When the angel of the Lord told her she would have son in her old age, she laughed. Then the angel of the Lord said to her, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord?" When the angel Gabriel told Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth would have a child in her old age, he expressed his doubt with the words, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years?" As proof this would come true he was unable to speak until the child John was born. Thomas would not believe Jesus rose from the dead unless he could put his fingers into the nail marks in his hands.

"Lord I believe, help my unbelief!" I want the Holy Spirit who caused the conception in the womb of Mary to bring new life and new faith and new awe and new amazement in my life this Christmas season. Let the miracle of the virgin birth of Jesus create in us an even greater appreciation of all the miracles that make up the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So we continue to ponder this text. **“But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”** God used his Word to open the stubborn heart of Joseph and create faith to believe. An angel could have appeared to him directly as with Mary, but with Joseph the angel appears in a dream. This is not like one of the dreams you had this past week. Joseph hears the angel speaking to him in this dream. What Mary was telling him was true. The child that was in her womb was not conceived through the seed of another man. This child was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The angel Gabriel told Mary that the name of the child was Jesus. This angel tells Joseph to name this child Jesus. The very name of Jesus has the power to open hearts to believe.

Have you ever had dreams that scare you? We call them nightmares. I don't have dreams of monsters chasing me, but more than once I have dreamt that I cannot find my clothes to wear to church on Sunday morning and by the time I get to worship, all the people have left. This is no nightmare. This was a dream from God that opened his heart to believe.

Can't you see Joseph waking up from this dream with his heart pounding for joy? Can't you see him running to find Mary, even it is in the middle of the night to tell her what he just heard, and how he believes everything she has told him about the miraculous conception and how he now believes that she is carrying in her womb the very Son of God whose name was Jesus?

Put your hand of faith over the womb of Mary. Within that womb is life, a real child, a tiny little child with a heart that is beating and hands that are forming and little feet and blood pumping through its body. That tiny baby is the very Son of God. The hands will be nailed to a cross for you. The blood will be shed to cleanse you of all your sin. His name is Jesus. As the angel Gabriel told Mary, “He will save his people from their sins.”

It's amazing how these days before Christmas can intensify our lives in every respect. You can almost feel the tension as you do your last minute shopping. These intense moments also have a way of underscoring how much we sin and fall short of God's glory in so many aspects of our lives. We desperately need a Savior to rescue us.

This past few weeks two of our members have undergone open heart surgery to repair hearts and give them longer life. It never ceases to amaze me how doctors can do these procedures and lives can be saved. There is no one who can undo the damage done to me because of sin that shows up in my life from a heart that is corrupted by sin. The prophet Jeremiah tells us, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? God sent his Son to have him suffer the punishment that I deserve so I can be forgiven and have peace with God. I put my hand of faith on the womb of Mary and humbly confess, “That's my Savior. That's my Jesus. That's the Son of God. That's my hope of eternal life.”

So we ponder even more. **“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”--which means, “God with us.”** Matthew, who was writing

primarily to Jewish people, loves to show how these things happened to fulfill a promise that was made in the Old Testament. The prophet Isaiah spoke this promise of a virgin bearing a son to a wicked king named Ahaz. Ahaz did not want to believe in miracles from the hand of the Lord, so the prophet Isaiah gave him a miracle that would cause people all over the world to stand in awe and amazement at the mighty hand of God. "The virgin will be with child and give birth to a son." His name would be called "Immanuel" which means God with us. So we sing at Christmas "O come let us adore him, O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord." So we sing on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, "God, from true God, and Light from Light Eternal, Born of a virgin, to earth he comes."

After the shepherds left Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus it says of Mary that she "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Some of the best moments waiting for you this Christmas season will be those moments when you ponder the miracle of the virgin birth and the miracle of the Word made flesh. May our wonderful Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, grant us such ponder time. Amen.