

Sermon: The Birth of Jesus

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 7:10-15; Matthew 1:18-25**

For the past several weeks, we've talked about Jesus' second coming. We've talked about repentance and Isaiah and building a smooth and straight highway for the king. Now, on this fourth and final Sunday of Advent, we can finally talk about the birth of Jesus.

His birth is a big deal but not as big a deal as Easter. Jesus' resurrection makes his birth important. Without Easter, Jesus is just another kid from Nazareth.

Of the four Gospels, only Matthew and Luke devote any time to the nativity story. Mark hits the ground running with the voice of one crying out in the wilderness and John goes back to the beginning but not to the manger. Luke gives us the extended version including all the details about the birth of John the Baptist. But only Matthew quotes Isaiah.

It may be there are too many people in the world now; or we're too spread out around the planet, too far from our spiritual roots; or maybe we spend more time looking down at our phones than we do looking up at the heavens, but do you think this story could happen today? Would anybody believe it? Would you believe it if it wasn't in the Bible?

There are a lot of reasons why not. We live in a big country, for one thing, with many competing voices trying to get our attention. And the story relies on a lot of dreams.

We're also not as religious a culture as perhaps we once were. Our homogenized society has, for the most part, separated its religious life from the everyday hustle and bustle of doing stuff, to the point where we are no longer mindful of God being with us out in the world. Advent tries to bring us back, to reconnect us with those aspects of our life that have gone off track.

As individuals, we know that God seeks us out and will welcome us back in a heartbeat. But as a group, Christians have a long way to go to be as close to God as people once were.

Today's first reading from Isaiah is another prophecy borrowed by Christians. Even though it matches up pretty neatly with Matthew's version of it, the situation with King Ahaz occurred in a specific time and place and had nothing to do with Jesus.

It works as a prophecy because no one knows who the child referred to by Isaiah turned out to be; it may very well have been a very early reference to Jesus. There's no way to know and no way to be wrong.

For Matthew, the main message revolves around two themes: who Jesus is and how his identity as the Messiah came about.

To that end, Matthew begins his account with a full genealogy of Jesus the Messiah. So, right off the bat, Matthew's audience knows who this story is going to be about. The genealogy includes three groups of fourteen generations, more or less; Matthew's counting is a bit off. Also, in an unusual move, it includes five women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. Unusual, but each woman somehow had a hand in continuing David's line.

But when all is said and done, theologically, Jesus is 'son of David, son of Abraham.'

A Swedish New Testament scholar named Krister Stendahl called today's passage 'the enlarged footnote to the crucial point in the genealogy'¹ which was 'Mary; of *her* was begotten Jesus, called the Christ.' The sharp-eyed reader might wonder, what about Joseph?

A lot of people want to know about Joseph.

In Matthew's Gospel, Joseph dreams three dreams. The one we heard today is the first. The next will tell him to leave Israel for Egypt because Herod was going to kill all the innocents in and around Bethlehem for fear of the unknown newborn king. The third dream would tell Joseph that Herod was dead, and it was now safe to return. Joseph would bring the family to Nazareth in Galilee because Joseph felt it was safer there than in Judea, and to be as far from political power and trouble as possible.

Throughout all of this, Joseph never says a word, and he drops out of the story after the third dream.

But this doesn't answer the question of what about Joseph if Jesus was begotten of Mary who conceived through the Holy Spirit.

It comes down to first-century marriage procedures and on what makes a family.

Matthew tells us that Mary had been *engaged* to Joseph and that they were living apart in their respective family homes. Matthew also calls Joseph Mary's *husband* and a righteous man.

In the first century, engagement and betrothal was the same as being married but your marriage wasn't official until you lived together. So, we can see how Joseph might have had a problem when he found out that Mary was with child.

And this is where God's grace and flexibility comes in.

We knew, before all this began, that Joseph was a righteous man, meaning he was obedient to the Law. How he decided to deal with Mary's pregnancy shows that he was also a kind and merciful man.

Then when he awoke from his dream, calm and collected, he resolved to adopt Jesus, which closed the loop on the Davidic lineage. Jesus' link to David through Joseph was both legitimate and of divine origin. The name Jesus means, 'He saves,' and Joseph gave it to his baby son. This proved Joseph to be respectful and in awe of God's plan for salvation.

Joseph doesn't *need* to say anything. His actions speak for him.

And God's actions move through the Holy Spirit. As for that, the Bible tells us the Holy Spirit is a God-given life-breath and the force by which God moved the prophets to speak. It was also the animating principle, if you will, of Jesus' ministry that came to him at his baptism. It also came to the disciples on Pentecost like the rush of a violent wind (Acts 1:1-2).

It might be good for us to hear this story every year.

For one thing, it reminds us that family units are often times far from traditional. A good parent can be anyone who is committed to raising a child with love and affection, and who doesn't mind teaching them things like carpentry or automobile engine repair.

The birth narratives also teach us that *all* of our descendants are important, not just the ones people remember fondly at holiday parties. Jesus' family tree includes some sketchy characters and some of them are complete nobodies, as far as we know, but together they made Jesus who he was.

And finally, Luke's narrative especially reminds us that the men in the story – Zechariah and Joseph – are either struck dumb by their unbelief or they're simply silent, not immediately recognizing what is before them.

But it's the women – Elizabeth and Mary – who appreciate the beauty and the mystery and the miracle of the good news of an unexpected pregnancy.

God decides how and when to get things done, using any means at hand. Advent intends for us to be ready for Christmas, to be watchful when God incarnate comes into the world.

Amen.

¹ Quoted by Raymond E. Brown in *The Birth of the Messiah – A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (133). Updated edition. Yale University Press. 1999.