

Matthew 1:18–25

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[0 : 00] The scripture text is Matthew chapter 1, 18 through 25 on page 895 of the Blue Bibles. Please stand for the reading of God's word.

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.

And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 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. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us. When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

[1 : 18] He took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and he called his name Jesus. This is the very word of God. Thanks be to God.

You may be seated. Thank you. Well, good morning, and welcome to Holy Trinity Church. If you're visiting or just in town for the upcoming holiday, we are privileged to have you here today.

We are in the midst of a short Advent series of sorts that walks really through the first couple of chapters of Matthew.

We handled a genealogy last week and Joseph's dream on this week. And I want to frame the text that's just been read for your benefit along the lines of a few questions.

What does heaven's advent have to do with earthly authorities? What does the impoverished birth of Jesus teach us or educate us concerning the international collaborative efforts at rebirth?

[2 : 40] What is Christianity doing with the kingdom of Christ, and what is its relationship to the kingdoms of this world?

You might hear the discussions even at a more natural level. What do politics have to do with the pulpit, or to what level are policies to be involved in the preaching?

Simply put, the Christian message of Christmas, the birth of Christ, what does it have to do with the way we solve our problems?

Clearly, Matthew thinks that there is some dynamic along the lines of those two fronts. He has put the birth of Jesus, which was the reading you had today, in the midst of this global conflict of kingdoms.

In other words, he's actually encircled the creche amidst sacred and secular sovereigns.

[3 : 49] I don't know if you noticed it that way before, but his Christmas is embedded in the political and ecclesial backdrop of the day.

The first 17 verses, it's a genealogy of Jesus, who is the king, literally, the promised sacred head of Israel.

And the lineage that was traced is a royal lineage, not through Mary's line, but through the auspices of Joseph, as he is in line with those who once held Israel's throne.

In other words, Christmas comes only within the context of Israel's king. And on the backside, where we will be next week, take a look, the secular powers are there.

Now, after he was born, no sooner does he have Jesus in the manger than you are introduced to the fact that it comes in the days of Herod the king.

[4 : 56] Sacred and secular authorities. And then the wise men, which we'll learn about if you come back, almost as foreign magistrates, emissaries from not just Herod and his rule, but from a far-off place and a rule that is all the way to the ends of the earth.

The birth of Jesus is encircled by these waves of sacred and secular authorities. And what does he want to say?

Put differently, what are the politics of Matthew's pulpit? The mystery of Christmas, beginning in verse 18, is how it took place.

Now the birth or the genesis or the origin 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.

The entire sentence is moving toward the end of the line. That the birth of Jesus happened in this way. His origins are from the Holy Spirit.

[6 : 15] Qualified, even though Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, he had not known her. The politics of Matthew's pulpit is that Christmas' king has his origins in God alone by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And if you don't catch it on the first line, he's going to actually bring it back in verse 20 when he says, through the voice of the angel now, to Joseph, don't fear to take her as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

Or even between those two, right in the middle of it, in verse 18, you begin to see that, I'm sorry, all the way down in verse 25, but he knew her not until she had given birth to a son.

And he called his name Jesus. He had not known her. He had not had intercourse with her. But Christmas' king, the son, is the son of God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the midst of a whole lineage of earthly powers, and in the days of one who had secular realm and his authority, we have one who comes by the power of the Holy Spirit.

[7 : 47] Now this is something we need to think about. This conception, this son of God, not men. By the power of the Spirit, not human seed.

That his origins are actually from on high. That is the emphasis. Now think about it. The Holy Spirit was said to be present before the heavens and the earth were created in Genesis 1-1.

That Spirit of God, that Spirit, life-giving Spirit, is hovering over waters. That same Spirit, which gives life to the world, is present in the condescension of a cloud on Sinai, where you now are in the very presence of God.

It's that Spirit, which intermittently appeared appeared through the ministry of individuals, prophets, and even kings, people who were overwhelmed, as it were, with the Holy Spirit.

In this regard, Luke's gospel picks up on the same focus of Matthew, in that Mary would be one who was in a sense overwhelmed or overshadowed, not by a man in the flesh, but by the Holy Spirit.

[9 : 10] that the conception of this child, the origins, rest with God as Father through the power of the Spirit.

This is the mystery of Matthew's Christmas. We like to think that the Spirit came at Pentecost, as if the return of the Spirit and the conclusion of the exile was when the Holy Spirit came after He had ascended into heaven.

Not so. We like to think that the Spirit really rested on Jesus simply at His baptism, that that was a transformative moment. And it was transformative.

But it didn't begin there. The New Testament record indicates that the moment of conception for the Christmas child is by the power of the Holy Spirit totally unrelated to anything human.

This is what the text states. This is what the creed claims. This is what modern man rejects. That God has mysteriously been at work in the origins of Jesus the Son.

[10 : 32] What's the significance of this? Well, Marx calls it a fairy tale and we'll be sooner, we'll be better off when we're sooner rid of it.

Christian apologists like Machen highlight this virgin birth, this conception of unnatural means as not merely the only focal point for people to wrestle with but really miracles in general.

That the virgin birth isn't the end all of faith but miracles in general and the resurrection in particular and Machen will go on to press his Christianity in the face of modernity of his day by indicating that we will either believe or disbelieve the message of the entire New Testament.

When you think of Thomas Mann, my favorite novelist and his massive work, Joseph and his brothers, he begins to indicate that sexual intercourse is not the only means by which reproduction takes place and he highlights very evocatively through the world of science and nature and even trees and seed and pollen and wind that often there's life that comes from things that are beyond merely intercourse almost as this middle ground between the natural world and the supernatural world.

But the scriptures are clear. Matthew's pulpit has political implication. The Christ, the King, the Son, the Savior, the Babe, the Infant is by the power of the Holy Spirit come to us from God on high.

[12 : 33] I want to talk about the implications of that. It means then that our needs as a people, whatever we think they are, are much larger than we have come to comprehend them to be.

our needs must be so great that it must be an internal need that can only be solved through some alien and externally inhabited righteousness in our midst.

It means that you're not going to solve any of the day's problems by looking within. I'm going to go further. We're not going to fully solve what needs to happen in the world by collaborating with.

That the Christmas message is more than unscrooging the scroogedness of your spirit or ungrinching! grinching the grinedness of your soul.

That it's more than being kind or nice. It's actually, Matthew is forcing himself upon you to realize that what Christmas does comes from the outside in.

[13 : 50] That there was no way to do it from the inside out. That when God decided to solve the problems of the world, he did not give you a president oh so fine.

He gave you prophetic fulfillment. He didn't give you a senator. He gave you a savior. He proclaims a gospel of good news to be received by faith.

Not a government that will get it done in his behest. In fact, he's doing this. He's putting Jesus right in the middle of all that in Matthew 1. It's a stunning thing to consider then.

The mystery of Christmas. God, with the power of the Holy Spirit, quickens, enlivens, impregnates a young woman of marriage age to bring himself into the human situation.

Unrelated ultimately to all that sacred lineage or those secular authorities. Indeed, Matthew wants you to know that Christmas is the arrival of the one to whom we'll have all authority over all people for all time.

[15 : 26] In other words, that God himself reigns in the life of his son. That Mary's womb, think of it, that Mary's womb actually becomes the creche for the creative, life-giving spirit of God now enfleshed To solve the depth of our ultimate need.

John Dunn, faithful poet of old, simply fell before this mystery with words that are more eloquent than my own.

Lo, faithful virgin, yes, thou art now thy maker's maker, and thy father's mother.

thou hast light in dark, and shuddered in little room, immensity cloistered in thy dear womb.

That's the mystery of Christmas. It is so otherworldly. It is so unnatural. It is so alien in the sense of its righteousness in an unrighteous world.

[17 : 01] It ought to humble every human who continues to think that we're going to get a hold of this stuff on our own.

There are severe limitations to what policy can do. Not that we don't give ourselves to all just policies.

This idea of today living in a day where we continue to look to the next generation, the generation of our children, because in their youthfulness perhaps they can solve what we didn't get accomplished, has desperate limitations.

We need to be telling our children and the children of our city that your ultimate hope to solve the situations in the world rests not with your ability to get it done, but it has to come from the outside.

That you actually need not just a culture-making environment, you need a Christ-submitting spirit. There's a repentance and a reception of something that God has done that alone has the life-giving power to quicken your behavior and the way in which you live among one another.

[18 : 33] That is the mystery of Matthew's Christmas. That is the politics of his pulpit. He is telling you in the midst of sacred and secular authorities, Christmas is God's final stamp that the answer comes from outside, from himself, his own son, to whom all allegiance is due.

The mystery of Christmas is this divine conception which just shouts out in stark contrast to what we're hearing all the time in the church and without our ability to get it all done.

That's the mystery. What's the message? The message is put down in the text through that messenger, the angel to Joseph.

Notice this calling of his name twice in the text, once through the angel as messenger and once through Isaiah's prophecy as message.

Verse 21, She shall bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins. The mystery is that he comes by the power of the Holy Spirit which is an indictment on our own human effort.

[20 : 09] the message is that his name is Jesus for he will save the people from their sins. That Christmas fundamentally at its core is spiritual not material.

He will save you from your sins. It's a holy day. It's a sacred day. that's the wonder of the birth.

Don't get lost in all of Christmas's wonder. Ultimately, it's not about getting hold of the better angels within us.

As you begin to reflect at the end of the year and want to live differently, it's not about that. it's not about what can I do next year on the self-improvement scale or some other scale.

It's not about gift giving. It's not. It's not about the giving of gifts. It's the gift that was given that restores relationship with God.

[21 : 24] the forgiveness of sins. Think of Christmas morning as sitting in your living room and God Almighty, creator of heavens and earth, in the big chair, and he gives you his son that you can stay in his house or have access to his house or sit with him.

the human problem is a sin problem. The human problem is a rebellious problem.

The human problem is we want to figure everything out here on our own and figure out how Jesus might actually be useful in the endeavor.

God but the message is there. The angel interprets the event. You call him Jesus because he saves his people from their sins.

And if you don't get that, then the message actually is filled out in verses 22 and following where you get again a calling of his name. name. But this time he picks up from Isaiah 7 and we're going to spend a minute or two there because there's something I want to explain to you.

[22 : 48] But not only shall you call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins, but they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means God with us.

God saves us. God is with us in Jesus. This is the presence of God is in this world, in our city.

This isn't a new city, this is our city. He's here with us in Jesus who comes with the power of the Holy Spirit. He is your present help in every day of trouble.

He is your advocate. He is the one to whom you look. I think of Chesterton and his wonderful little play The Surprise, which concludes in two acts and I'm not going to give it all to you.

I'm just going to give you the last line. It envisions the playwright, the director, over the edge of the stage calling down to all the actors who have gone chaotically unwired.

[23 : 55] He's yelling, stop, stop. You're ruining my play. I'm coming down. stop. That's Christmas.

That's Emmanuel. That's God with us. That's God looking over the lintel of your doorway. That's looking over the threshold of the universe. That's seeing what we have done with ourselves to one another and to him and saying, I'm done with it.

I can't get it done from one of you. I'm coming down. Emmanuel, God with us. The playwright, the director on stage, inhabiting himself in human form.

Amen. Think of it. The mystery. our need must be so great, beyond our comprehension, if the answer had to actually come through some unnatural suspension of the laws of nature, in which the spirit of the living God, which once hovered over the waters, would hover over the womb of a young girl.

A new man, born, unstained, by Adam's sin. And a man whose message is salvation, and his presence with us.

[25 : 36] Let me just put it to you this way then. What are you going to do? What do you do with Christmas? Two responses, in the text anyway.

There's a response in the text through the lens of the Isaiah quote in verse 23. It's the response, literally, of a man who found himself in the lineage of chapter 1 and verse 9.

The words of 1 23 were spoken to Ahaz of 1 9. As a sign of judgment on his disbelief regarding how his political situation would get solved.

If you go back to Isaiah 7, you're going to see that little Judah, two tribes, were getting ganged up on by the ten northern tribes of Israel who had made a political alliance with Syria.

And Ahaz was fearful for his life because of the political alliances that had moved against him. And Isaiah comes to him and says, do not be afraid, do nothing, wait on the Lord to save you.

[27 : 09] Now, what you don't get in Isaiah is what you get back in 2 Kings and that's what Ahaz did with the message. Ahaz was so fearful he ran over to Assyria and said, I need an alliance with you to get me out of this jam.

So he runs this political alliance to bring military strength that he thinks will fend off the enemy but in doing so he actually rejects the word of Isaiah to him which is I'm going to do this for you.

In fact, God said to him, ask a sign. I mean, any kind of sign you want is almost the implication. And Ahaz with all of his religious piety says, oh, I'm not going to ask for a sign.

Of course he's not going to ask for a sign. He had already run a contract through Assyria and looked for human strength to save him. And so God says, well, you're not going to ask for a sign.

I'm going to give you a sign. A young girl who is aged and ready to be married is going to have a son and through that son I am going to get my thing done.

[28 : 21] In other words, the virgin birth, the promise of a boy through a young girl to save God's people, was originally a word of judgment on an unbelieving king who would get it done on his own terms.

You don't want to be Ahaz. You want to be more like Joseph. Verse 19, he was a just man, unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly, and was considering this very act.

In other words, Joseph was like, oh my word, the woman I'm betrothed to, see, the parents had made an arrangement of marriage when they were kids, there came a season where they lived one year apart of betrothal before the marriage, and in that moment, all of a sudden, she's carrying a child, and he knows, having not known her, that it is not his, and he has two options, Deuteronomy 22, stone her at the door of her father, or write her a certificate of divorce, numbers 5, with a minimal number of witnesses present, 2, according to the Mishnah, and let this thing go away and get on with his life, and because he's a respectful man, he's like, I gotta get out of this, I need an annulment, there are two ways to annul it, one is to take her life, one is to do this quietly, I'm going to do it quietly, in other words, he wasn't ready for the mystery of Christmas, and that's when the angel appears, but notice what he does, verse 24, when he woke from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son, and called his name

Jesus, in other words, he received the word of the messenger, took it by faith, come what may, to his own reputation, that's how you become a Christian, you're either going to sort this out on your own, and give your entire life, to creating the answers without God, or are you going to receive the prophetic word that we have a son, which only highlights the depth of my need, who has come as the savior of my sins, and the abiding presence of God, they'll think I'm foolish, they'll think the people

I'm with are scandalous, but I'm here, Joseph, called his name, Jesus.

[31 : 43] Our heavenly father, as we continue to ready our own souls for Christmas, we often wonder, we often wonder what is the import of this day, given the world in which we live, and we just want to steady our minds, Lord, knowing that many are doing good work in government, we nevertheless thank you for the gospel.

Lord, help your church especially, help us especially, to place our faith, our hope, our trust and the Savior.

Help us on Christmas morning, to comprehend in a new way, the greatness of our own need. Grant unto many, even today, your spirit, to believe the things which are said.

Give us life, and then enable us, Lord, to go from this place and verbalize it to others. As Joseph called his name, Jesus, may we go and tell that name to many.

In whose name we pray, Amen. Amen.