

Matthew 1:18–25

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[0 : 00] The passage this morning will be the book of Matthew chapter 1, verses 18 to the end of the chapter in verse 25.

Matthew 1, beginning in 18 and reading through verse 25. This is what God's word says. 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.

[1 : 08] 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. He took his wife, but did not know her until she had given birth to a son.

And he called his name Jesus. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning.

I welcome you on this third Sunday of Advent. And I'm particularly encouraged by the fact that we have lit a candle that symbolizes joy.

I don't know how you came into the house of the Lord today, but not all of us walked in with joy, but we've been reminded already that joy ought to be the disposition of our heart.

[2 : 13] Joy. That said, Christmas can be inconvenient. I'm going to title this talk, The Inconvenience of Christmas.

It's coming, but there are so many things swirling in your life. So many decisions to be made. So many uncomfortable facts that are now known. So many dilemmas under which your mind is operating.

That while Christmas is coming, your own mind is elsewhere. It's nearly here, but it's an inconvenient year.

Well, at least it's nice to know that the very first Christmas was inconvenient as well. I think Matthew has given us this little narrative on Joseph, at least in part, not only to connect him to the lineage that we saw last week, but to connect him to the experiences that you and I have on all the inconveniences as God attempts to break in.

[3 : 28] Did you hear me? God is attempting to break in to your life. And by nature, it can be inconvenient. You're going to see today that this inconvenient Christmas, for Joseph at least, emerged from a dilemma that was in his own circumstances.

And that dilemma only was escalated in conflict through a dream. And that dream, rooted in the dilemma, gave forth to a decision that would alter his life.

I believe that also to be true today. In fact, my aim, my hope, my in the darkness of the early morning prayers, is that the host of decisions that you are now facing in life, through this text, would cause you to emulate Joseph and continue to humbly receive and obey God's word.

That's my prayer for you this day. Christmas is coming. And inconvenient though it may be, may you emulate Joseph and humbly receive God's word.

Well, let's take a look. I've hinted at it. It was inconvenient for one named Joseph, namely his dilemma, which comes right there in verses 18 and 19.

[5 : 00] The dilemma of Joseph. 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. What a dilemma for Joseph.

Engaged. His union not yet consummated. And now he learns that Mary, his betrothed, is with child. I suppose you need to know a little bit about marriage, particularly those who would have been in this Jewish line, following Mosaic law, it would have presented a great quandary to Joseph. From the moment, writes one writer, that Mary was betrothed as wife to Joseph, their relationship was sacred.

[6 : 09] In other words, from the engagement on. Holy. A breach of it would be treated as adultery. Nor could the band be dissolved, but by regular divorce.

Yet months might intervene between the betrothal and the marriage. I do remember when I got engaged on December 24th of 1983, a special gift I had that I wanted to give to thee.

A heart within a heart shall my desire be. One within the other in perfect harmony. I wasn't a poet then. I'm not a good one now, but that's the way I laid it down.

And we were engaged. The wedding, though, I soon found out, wasn't going to be until August. Now, that's a long run.

But such it is for many, and such it was at this time here. They were betrothed. They were engaged. But the wedding day was yet in the future. And now this young, groomed to be, learns that the woman of his life, the lady of his dreams, the one that he had put his eye on, is now with child.

[7 : 32] And he's not quite sure what to do with it. He's not thinking about Christmas. He's thinking about inconvenience. He's thinking about character.

He's thinking about, what do I do? He's thinking about, my entire life rides on this moment. As do some of the decisions that sit before you.

A dilemma is defined as a situation in which a difficult choice has to be made between two or more alternatives, alternatives, especially equally undesirable ones.

That's not my words. It's Google. A dilemma is a situation where there are difficult choices that must be made, neither of which seems to be desirable.

For Joseph, two decisions were before him, two options, two considerations on this first, most inconvenient of Christmases.

[8 : 43] Public disgrace. Dig his heels in. Go big. Go bold. Make sure everybody knows that she's the problem and not him.

Make his appeal, as it were, to Deuteronomy 22:20 and call for some stoning. Now, fortunately, the text says he's a just man.

He's a fair man. He's a man in love. Let's put it that way. This option didn't sit well with him. Perhaps he reflected back not on a public display of disgrace, but a private dismissal.

It says there in verse 19 that he resolved to divorce her quietly. That must be an appeal to Mosaic Law, the book of Numbers, chapter 5, where it talks about a situation where the marriage itself could be dissolved, writ out, but the dignity of life can be guarded.

You do know, do you not, that love covers a multitude of sins? So being a fair-minded man, a just man, being a good man, he has no sense of wanting to go forward with public disgrace.

[10 : 04] He wants to resolve to put this thing quietly away. That's all he needed to do. In fact, I think it broke his heart. He had wanted to be married to the woman of his dreams.

Well, he considers these options. You can get that even as you begin to lean into verse 20, can't you? But as he considered these things, it almost seems that he decided a course of action.

My life's going to be different as a result of today. It's not what I had hoped it would be, but I'm going to move forward, but I'm going to sleep on it.

I say sleep on it because in verses 20 through 23, we see that he has a dream and 24 will find us awakened to the dream, to the decision that he makes.

But the dream is actually very interesting. There's three observations, but I want you to see it. It moves from his dilemma, 18 and 19, to his dream.

[11 : 17] Verse 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.

she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. And 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. And it isn't then that you read when Joseph awoke from his dream.

The dream. Three observations. Let me signpost it for you. It was going to be a supernatural birth. Verse 20, in which we see a savior for sin. Verse 21, both of which, this birth of the savior are a fulfillment of the scriptures.

[12:26] Now, that should be as easy as possible for note-taking. Right? A supernatural birth, a savior from sin, the fulfillment of scriptures. Let's just look at it because in his mind, he went to bed resolved to terminate the marriage.

But an angel appears to him in the dream, and it presents a different option. And first of all, he's basically told don't be afraid to go forward with the marriage because the child within Mary's womb was miraculously conceived.

In other words, young man, you have nothing to worry about in regard to the woman that you have chosen. This is unlike any other situation that you will ever encounter in life.

God has suspended the natural order and working of things, and he has in your betrothed brought forth life of his own accord.

That God has, in a sense, worked outside of conventional wisdom. He's worked outside of sexual union that the one that you're to marry is with child, but not by another man, but because the Holy Spirit, the breath of God has moved upon her.

[13:47] That the one from on high has worked in a different way. He's told then that it's going to be supernatural.

People have tried to think about this in all kinds of ways. I mean, this is a mystery, is it not? I think of poetry, I think of John Dunn. I stood one day in the Chapel Seven Oaks, a couple hours south of London, where John Dunn was a rector before being appointed the head of St. Paul's in London. I've seen the pulpit from which John Dunn would have preached, but he's best known in the English-speaking world for his poetry, for his verse. for his song, and this is what he says as he considers this supernatural birth.

Lo, faithful virgin, yes, thou art now thy maker's maker and thy father's mother. Thou hast light in dark, sheltered in little womb, immensity, cloistered in thy dear womb.

I mean, he's affirming the mystery. He's embracing the unimaginable.

[15:14] He's conveying through verse the truth of these words that upon Mary is now light in dark, sheltered in little room.

He's, he's indicating that somehow while he can't understand it, he, he is testifying immensity is cloistered in thy dear womb.

well, you're not all poets. We're not all won over by the beauty of his verse.

So how might some of the rest of you consider this supernatural birth? I guess I would make an appeal not only to poetry but to the natural world. I'm not a scientist.

Let's make that clear. And yet, there are elements in our created order in our natural world that emerge outside of sexual union.

[16:23] In other words, we're not all dependent on sexual union to see life emerge in the world in which we live. Now, in our day, culture has made sex and the act of sexual union the ultimate in regard to personal identity.

And it's very unfortunate because it's placed sexual union as the indicator of humanness and freedom and vitality of necessity of being.

And this is not the case. It's not even the case in the world in which we live. Sexual union is not the ultimate baseline for human flourishing, regardless of what you're told when you walk out these doors.

Thomas Mann, who wrote a book, *Joseph and His Brothers*, has this dialogue between Joseph and Potiphar's wife. And in the dialogue, there's this discussion that takes place on union.

And Mann has Joseph saying, quote, the universe is full of begetting and giving birth in ways that do not require sex.

[17:39] consider the trees. For it is not by sex that they propagate, but outside of it, not by pollination or conception, by shoots or runners in the ground, but by the wind, which carries the seed of the pollen trees and plants them on the ground.

The world, he writes, is full of fruit defying and bringing forth without sex from the fruitification of the breath of God.

Mann goes on, for all things were first present in the thoughts of God and the word born by the breath of God, which is their begetter.

What is he appealing to? He's appealing to the notion, the truth of the scriptures that God said, let there be and there was. That the breath of God, the speech of God, has the power to create the created order.

And even within the created order, something within a tree, all of a sudden is caught by the wind. And it's the wind that puts this in a place where it can bring forth life.

[18 : 57] So it is in this instance, with Mary's miraculous conception, salvation, the spirit of God, from the mind of God, who's able to create ex nihilo, suspends the natural order of things under God so that Christmas can break in unstained, that God can remain unstained in our sinful world.

This is the way that I've become to think of it. I will never fully understand this conception, but I affirm the words of John Dunn.

I affirm the truth of the natural order. I consider that God, to break in, has done something by his own breath, by his own spirit, and the angel is now making that known to Joseph.

Let me just pause here. When it comes to the host of decisions you face today, will you continue to humbly receive God's word, or displace it for a mind of your own?

Not only is it a supernatural birth, which he's now coming to grips with in a dream, it moves in verse 21 to a savior from sin.

[20 : 51] Did you see that? We're now seeing the message of Christmas, not the manner in which Christmas came. And the message of Christmas is she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

Mary is to bear a son who is a promised savior king. Christmas then, think about it, inconvenient as it is, given all the other things you're trying to sort out in life, is about this fundamental primary idea that you and I need a savior from sin.

The inconvenience of Christmas is cataclysmic in meaning. Here is one in the manger who has come for the purpose of saving us from our sins.

Christmas. I can't sugarcoat that. Christmas addresses the human sin problem. So while Christmas is getting in your way, it has come to resolve the great issues of your life.

All have sinned. each one of us has gone on to our own way. There's not a man or a woman or a child under the sound of my voice that is not undone before a holy and righteous God.

[22 : 25] Holy, holy, holy God. We are without hope, save his sovereign mercy. We're not merely in trouble, we're dead in our sins.

we have no way of rectifying our rupture with God brought about by our own willful choices. I mean, am I speaking to anyone here?

I'm speaking to everyone here. Am I not? Preacher and people alike. It's not that we just, we need a little help from the better angels within us.

No, we need the angel that appeared to Joseph to appear to us and indicate again that the human condition is one of separation from God. No, not merely separation from God, but a ruptured relationship with God.

No, not merely a ruptured relationship with God, but one that we are personally, individually, in my own self, completely responsible for and without hope.

[23 : 27] And yet, Christmas joy is that a son is born with the express purpose, of saving us from sin, of restoring relationship with God.

Now, what dilemma and decisions are you in the midst of that are crowding out Christmas that this text might say, whoa, Christmas has come at a very inconvenient time for me, but thank God I went to Christ Church Chicago because I've begun to realize Christmas is the very thing I need, whether I'm ready for it or not.

God chooses to break in. God chooses to save. It's a beautiful thing. When you think of chapter 1 in Matthew, then, if chapter 1 verses 1 to 17 was emphasizing that a king is coming into the world, this first little narrative here, then with Joseph is indicating that the king is the savior, that the savior is the king.

Jesus, savior, king. He can't be your savior without your lord. He must be your lord. He's got to be strong enough to displace all the enemies of your own interior world.

If he's not strong enough to displace all the enemies of your interior world, he can't save you, but in order to save you, he has to be ruler over all these things. And what Matthew is saying is he's coming.

[25 : 09] He's coming. Let me ask you then, when it comes to the host of decisions that you are facing in life right now, the things that are consuming your mind, will you continue to decide humbly to receive and obey God's word?

Will you indicate the incarnation is a mystery? I'll never fully get my hands on, but I embrace it. The incarnation is a message that I can be saved from my sins.

Third, and these things are both in fulfillment of scripture. Interestingly, start putting your eyes on verse 22. At verse 22, the narrator, the writer's voice, breaks into the story.

Can you tell that by looking at it? The storytelling is stopped so that the writer can speak. I mean, if it was just the story, it could have moved straight to verse 24 following verse 21.

The angel says, she will bear a son, you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save people from his sins. Verse 24, when Joseph woke from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded. That's storytelling.

[26 : 26] But writer's like, I got a great story to tell, but I have something to say. And what the narrator has to say is right there in verses 22 and 23.

In other words, get this, as readers of the Christmas event this morning, you are now getting the writer's interpretation. That's what I want you to know is happening in 22 and 23.

you've moved out of the event of Christmas, how it came, what it signifies in coming, to what the writer wants to indicate in regard to intention.

In other words, he wants you to pay special attention to this. Verse 22, 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.

What is happening here? Why does the writer decide to reference one verse from the corpus of Isaiah's testimony?

[27 : 36] He's pulling from chapter 7 and verse 14, and he won't let us read the story of Joseph and Mary and Jesus without reflecting, self-consciously on Isaiah and Ahaz and Israel.

Well, give me a minute. Can I just explain this briefly to you? What he does here, because I went back and took a look, he's picking up one verse from a scene where God's prophet, God's angel, God's messenger, Isaiah himself, where Isaiah had a conversation with the king of Israel, or the king of Judah, Ahaz.

Now, the king was in a troubled state of mind. You need to know that the king at that time had all kinds of important decisions that were eating up his sleeping hours.

The king was afraid. The king found Isaiah's words inconvenient. The king knew that the land above him had made an alliance with an outside power that put pressure on him.

And he was wondering, how am I going to survive? How are we going to make our way? We need salvation.

[29 : 21] We need protection. We need a covering because there is now a militaristic alliance above me that is going to undo me.

That was the scene. What 2nd Kings tells you is how he handled it. he turned to the south and said, well, maybe if I get into an alliance with these people, I can strengthen myself and we'll be a buffer against those people.

So in the working of his mind, Ahaz was in a dilemma. he had fear and he made a human arrangement to secure his own salvation.

Isaiah comes in and says, Ahaz, I'll give you a sign. A virgin shall conceive and give birth to his son. Isaiah's word had been to him, don't do a thing. Don't extricate yourself from your own predicament.

[30 : 47] Don't lift a finger to save yourself or get yourself out of it or clear your name or secure your future.

Don't do a thing. Ahaz says, I can't do that. So Ahaz is very unlike Joseph.

That's where this is leading. I was stunned to realize again that the verse 23, which is a quotation from the Old Testament, was actually in its first utterance a sign of judgment, not joy.

I mean, when you read that, don't you think, that's a joyful verse out of Isaiah. Behold, a virgin shall conceive, give birth to a son, and they'll call his name Emmanuel.

Joy, rejoice! yes, but it actually came out of Isaiah's mouth as an indication of judgment of what God is going to do in the world in spite of the fact that you try to do everything to get yourself together. [32 : 02] some of you need to hear this this morning. Some of you need to just sit and let God save, because you're just going to multiply your problems by all the human conventional thinking that will try to clear you of the things that are inconvenient right now in your life.

Now consider this then, the horror of being Ahaz. Did you know that he was actually in that list that we read last week?

He's there. Start looking over there. You'll find him in there. He's there. I'm not even going to give you the verse, so your eyes will just start glancing around. You'll find him. Ahaz, get this, received the He was himself in the line that brought forth the Christ, but in belief he is not going to be at the wedding supper of the Lamb.

Ahaz rejected God's word, secured his own way forward in the world, and as a result was not willing to humbly receive and obey God's voice.

can you imagine being in the genealogical line of Christ and not being in his family? Now, contrast that with Joseph because now Joseph awakes from this dream.

[33 : 47] The dilemma is massive. The decisions he's going to make are going to be life-altering. He's received a dream now that God is doing something out of the ordinary in your life, Joseph, and in the life of Mary.

God is doing something out of the ordinary means. Salvation is coming into the world, and the scriptures themselves are being fulfilled.

That the promises are now arriving with the birth of Christ. And now, verse 24, Joseph makes his decision.

There it is. And with this I'm done. When Joseph woke from the sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took his wife, but he knew her not until she had given birth to his son, and he called his name Jesus.

He did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. I'm no angel. you didn't need to know that, did you?

[34 : 57] But I'm your messenger today. Will you do as I have told you? Will you, in the midst of the inconvenience of Christmas, given all the things that are in front of you today, will you believe that God can accomplish something in your life?

will you hold that he's capable of doing something supernatural? Will you embrace, not only that you're a sinner, but that he's the savior?

will you walk forward realizing that the scriptures themselves are trustworthy?

That's what Joseph did. He remained chaste. He named his miracle child Jesus, which means salvation, savior.

what about you? What about me? I'm done. But leave the self-saving world of Ahaz behind.

[36 : 23] I know that's going to be scary for you because you don't know anything other than life than getting yourself out of your own predicament. The temptation is to do something that will beat back the forces that are overwhelming your situation.

But when it comes to the host of decisions you're facing in life, I am pleading with you, emulate Joseph. Humbly receive God's word.

And at that point, Christmas gets merry not merely a mess. Our heavenly father, as we continue our journey these weeks to ready our heart by Christmas morning, I pray that this church family, my friends, my brothers and sisters, that we would learn to arrive at Christmas quietly under consideration like Joseph and that we would receive all that you've given to us in Jesus.

Amen. Thank you.