

O Little Town of Bethlehem

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Preacher: Rev. James Wagner

[0 : 0 0] Amen. Before you're seated, will you please pray with me? Come, will you give us your grace now that we would truly hear your word, we would receive that into our hearts, and that we would show forth the fruit of your Holy Spirit, the very character of Christ. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Come, please be seated now. Well, I just did something that you might have missed because you were confessing the faith of the church in those words of the Nicene Creed, and while you were doing that, I took the Bible from here and I placed it over there.

That's not a very good optic, and I'm not setting aside the word of God. And in fact, what I want you to do is actually pick up your order sheet and turn to page four.

Because I want to look at Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus Christ in chapter 1, beginning at the 18th verse. Sometimes we need to hear about this more than once, so if you were here last night, this is a second go-round by a different person, so it'll be a slightly different sermon.

But I've titled this sermon, Birth Order, and that may draw some other ideas to your mind, but it's really important that we bear in mind that on this Christmas morning, this birth was ordered by our Lord, by our Heavenly Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and all are brought to bear in this passage with respect to that.

[1 : 3 9] Our Lord has ordained the birth of our Son, and that's why we're here this morning to worship the newborn King. And so the great anticipation and expectation of Christmas has arrived.

This great expectation is an anticipation that is turned actually into an invitation. For we worship a great God, and the Lord invites us to an adoration of God in the coming of Jesus Christ the Lord. The conception and birth of Jesus is great and awesome news, but the story tells us that it didn't start that way. So I'm going to look at two things this morning, and the first thing is an expectation, then and now, but also an exclamation, our Lord's, but also ours.

So first then, an expectation, something of a crisis of one. Let me ask you a question. Have things ever turned out unexpectedly in your life? I think we can all nod our head to that.

Maybe they started out the way you expected, but all of a sudden it took a turn for the worse. And then something helped you see it in a new light. Whatever helped you see things differently didn't make the unexpected matter go away, but helped you accept and move through it.

[2 : 5 9] Life is always like that, to a matter of degrees we must admit. Such is the birth narrative of Jesus Christ. And the impact on our Lord's earthly father named Joseph.

What an event that was for him. Well, Matthew informs us that the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. Not in a land far away, in a time long, long ago. As a matter of fact, it wasn't a fantasy at all.

It was like most births, yet unlike ours. The delivery was normal, but the conception was not just unusual, but unique. Shocking.

Unsettling. And this is a crisis of expectation for Joseph. A crisis for Joseph, who weren't making this up, and neither was the author of Matthew, or the author Matthew.

Why would, after all, anyone make something like this up? Why is Matthew actually telling this story? Well, before we get to the why, Matthew tells us how it happened.

[4 : 0 4] Joseph and Mary were betrothed, but celibate. The unexpected took place. The author describes it in these four ways. One, Matthew and Mary and Joseph didn't come together.

That was expected. Mary found to be with child. That was unexpected. Mary with child from the Holy Spirit, the text tells us.

Unconceivable, yet divinely conceived. Joseph resolved, or committed to divorce Mary quietly, but committed to do things rightly.

The Holy Spirit here, then, is the person behind this unexpected turn of events. The Holy Spirit, who is the great change agent. He's the one who brings together Mary and Joseph, but not sexually. He conceives the child in Mary's womb, like we know never before. He convicts Joseph, but he compels him.

[5 : 08] Compels him to treat her rightly and kindly. To do a good work that God has prepared in advance for him to do. The third person of the Trinity in this story is bringing about unexpected change for something utterly unique.

This is the coming of Jesus Christ. The fulfillment of God's promised Messiah. While God's people expected the Lord to work, they had no idea that it was going to happen in this way. No one could predict this. Matthew's major theme in this story about Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God. God's plan. God's promise.

Prophesied. But in some ways, not understood in the way that people were about to experience. Especially Joseph and then the rest of us. Jesus Christ is the Messiah.

Erupting, as it were, through this crisis of expectation. Which slowly then raises people's expectations. And it eventually exceeds our expectations.

[6 : 16] Though it's all about then God's exaltation. So I want to look at that now. This was the expectation, the crisis of it. Joseph, and even ours. But then there's this exclamation that happens.

Which is our Lord's, but then becomes ours too. So, Joseph was resolved and committed to action. But one step from executing it.

There is this D word that comes into this play. The word divorce. The text reads, And her husband. That is, Joseph resolved to divorce her quietly.

But as he considered these things. That's how it unfolds. He considers or reflects or broods on his own plan. What he should do. What he thinks he should do.

Yet to follow through on it. He could never actually deliver it. Because some interruption, intervention happens about his plan for divorce. I wonder, are you ever like this?

[7 : 17] Do you ever find yourself in a situation when you think or you know what is the right course of action? You're committed. Your mind upon this. You're reflecting on your course of action.

Yet there might be some ambivalence. It's not a kind of procrastination or a compromising. But then the Lord speaks to you about this matter.

That's what happens to Joseph. By an angel, the Lord spoke the good news. Good news. And better than he could have dreamt. Though it came through a dream.

The good news came by way of an angel and explanation. Conceived by the Holy Spirit. And the good news came with a commission. Look with me at verses 20 and 21.

This commission was to take and to call. Verse 20. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, saying, Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife.

[8 : 24] For that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Continuing on in 21 then, we read. She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus.

The commission is twofold. Take and call. Most importantly, the angel that is a messenger. Which are, you know, just divine spiritual posties, I consider.

He doesn't conceive, but he delivers this message, the angel. He will save his people from their sins. That's Jesus' primary and ultimate purpose.

He doesn't come to bring judgment, but actually to bear judgment. And he won't come to build barriers, though some people treat him like that, but to remove barriers between God and man.

The sick and saturated with sin. Jesus will save from our spiritual depravity. This is the good news. Though it won't make life easier for Joseph and Mary, we know how difficult it is.

[9 : 27] We cannot maybe even imagine what it was like for Mary to track with her son all the way to the cross. No, it was really, really difficult for them. But it will make life redemptive.

The exclamation, he will save his people from their sins, will restore the lordship of God to not only the people of God, but to the whole world then and now. Isn't this the way the good news works in your life, I hope?

You have some crisis of expectation. You think things are going to go the wrong way, and you find yourself in a terrible bind. Maybe because of your own sin or the sin of someone else. And then God exclaims by the messenger, that is the Holy Spirit, through the word of God and his people of God, the good news.

God saves his people from their sin. Saves not just others out there, but you, me, personally. And so the Holy Spirit reminds us that what is ultimately significant, not that he'll heal your disease, give you a better job, a bigger house, a loving spouse, an obedient child.

Remove your pain, whatever the case. No, the good news is he will save you from your sins. But that's not all, though. The exclamation has another part to it.

[10:52] In fact, there are two parts to it. The Messiah has two names we learn here. Not only Jesus, but Emmanuel. And why is that? Well, not only does the Savior come to save us from our sins, but he is with us.

You see, Jesus means save us from our sins. That God is for us and not against us. That God is also the judge, but Jesus is also judged for us.

That's Jesus. But there's Emmanuel who is, God isn't just for us, but he's with us. Verse 23, Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel.

We get these parentheses, which means God with us. You see, God's exclamation of salvation isn't some kind of fling or visitation or apparition.

The promise of God is the actual presence of God. He is really with us in this time and at this place.

[11:58] We're not just talking about him on Christmas morning. He is with us. Christianity isn't just a good idea. It's good news. It isn't a brilliant philosophy.

It's a bold truth. Christianity like no other religion, because it is a reality through a relationship with Jesus Christ. God with us in Jesus.

Then, now, and forever. That's the Christmas message of Christianity. God in Jesus Christ comes and he is with us.

He dwells with us. He draws us in. He drives us gently into the world in which we live. He's here, always. And this makes all the difference in the way we live our life, both now and forevermore.

It means that we don't have to deliver ourselves. We don't have to claim our own defense. Though we're sinners, through Jesus Christ, his life, his death, his resurrection, our Lord will make the case, not only for our innocence, which he does, but he's with us.

[13:10] That's what Emmanuel means. And that's God's exclamation of salvation. Emmanuel with us, and we're never alone. So this should change the way we live our lives this day.

We think about the new year coming, make resolutions, this expectation, this exclamation grips us with the grace of God. It moves us to exclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, God for us, not against us, always with us.

Every time things don't turn out the way we expect, not only in our lives, but in others' lives, we can ask, why did this happen? Why did I think like that?

What was my expectation? And into that situation, we listen for the Spirit of God. In just that kind of situation, we're reminded of Jesus' birth.

It was unexpected in that way. Yet, He has come for us. And always there, always here. And for that reason, we come to worship the newborn King, Emmanuel, this morning.

[14:21] And we also go, as those shepherds did that first morning, and tell it on the mountain. Or any way that Emmanuel compels us to do it.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.