

Part 1 - The Story of Christmas

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Date: 22 December 2019

[0 : 00] And if you're new, so glad you can make it. Probably have some family in and visiting us for the first time or maybe again. But glad you could be here. Those of you that probably will be listening later in the week, sorry we missed you.

Trust your travels to your family and wherever your Christmas holiday was taking you, whatever that destination was that you get there safely. But thanks for staying in or hanging in and staying up with us via the sermon.

And anyways, we're starting, we just ended an Ecclesiastes series. We're starting a two-part series, an Advent series called The Unfolding Story, as you can tell by the graphic up there.

And better late than never, right? Some of our other locations of One Harbor, they've been doing this since the beginning of December. But we get to jump into it now. It is fascinating, if you stop and think about it, how respected is that Christmas is as a holiday.

It's a very respected holiday. Even though many of us wouldn't buy into all of the religious part of Christmas at all. We love Christmas. We love that time of year. It's about gifts and presents and lights and eggnog and family and friends and Christmas parties and awesome food and more eggnog, if you will.

[1 : 16] But then there's us as Christians. We're like, man, those things are great. But we always fight, make sure we're careful to keep Christ in Christmas, right? And so important that we slap it on our bumpers as well, on our car.

And it's a big deal. We've got to fight for that. We sing and we listen to Christmas carols. We read the Christmas story about Jesus in the manger, angels singing to the shepherds, wise men bringing their gifts.

And no doubt we probably have nativity set up in our households. So even with all that focus on Jesus, it's easy to let the familiarity of the story of Christmas become just this distant observation.

It's something that happened a long time ago in a land far, far away with other people, right? But Jesus' coming back then, when we look at it, man, it interrupted people's lives in significant ways, ways that weren't sweet and sentimental.

Because the story of Christmas is more than just looking back in a sentimental way of, oh, yeah, God came to earth, which is awesome to remember. But this story, the story of Christmas, it's much more than that.

[2 : 25] And it's the story of God not just breaking into people's lives back then, but it reminds us that, man, God breaks into our lives. Not just once, but again and again and again.

It's supernatural. It's a supernatural story. It's not a loony story. It's supernatural, right? It's hard to explain. And we're going to jump into Matthew's version of the Christmas story of Jesus being born in verse 18.

All right, Matthew 1, verse 18, it says this. Now, the birth of Jesus 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.

Now, it's easy to read that. We're really familiar with that, right? That part of the story, yep, got it, cool, awesome. But let's be reminded that God put his son into a virgin womb. Now, that's not an easy one to explain today.

And let's not think that it was easy to explain back then because it wasn't. I do not envy, nor should you, envy Mary and Joseph's predicament, what they were presented with in that moment of their lives.

[3 : 33] Mary was probably very freaked out. I'm sure Joseph was freaked out as well. But God didn't go about conducting focus groups with everybody to figure out what would be the easiest thing for us to believe.

Because if he's God, we have to recognize this. God's ways are higher than our ways. See, before Joseph and Mary came together, you know, in the biblical sense of that, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Joseph knew this. He knew what Mary was claiming and what Mary's family was also claiming, right? Elizabeth had come to know this and Zachariah had come to know this.

Now, he may have respected their claim, but he wasn't quite buying it. And that's like Christmas for many of us today, man. We respect it, but not quite buying into all of it.

Verse 19, it says, So, first things first.

[4 : 36] There's a couple of confusing things to clear up here, right? Because when we look at this and we see, man, it says Joseph was her husband already. It's a bit confusing. So, we read modern marriage into how ancient Jewish marriage worked.

So, if Joseph was her husband already, then that means two things. Mary being pregnant couldn't have been a shocker, right? Because they were already together and they probably knew each other.

She wouldn't have been a virgin. But just allow me to geek out. Take a little bit of pause here. And I'm going to teach on some ancient Jewish marriage traditions as a Christmas present to myself.

All right? So, in their day, in their day, marriage happened in two stages, right? There was stage one, the betrothal. It said Joseph and Mary would be betrothed to each other.

They were promised to each other. And the betrothal happened when a girl's family and a guy's family would come together. They would usually meet in a common place. And the fathers would work out the contract of marriage between their two kids.

[5 : 35] And this included the payment price for the bride. Now, it is at this point that the marriage covenant was written and then sealed. Check this out. When the bride and groom shared a cup of wine together.

Now, at this point, the bride and groom were officially in a committed marriage. That's why he could say Joseph was Mary's husband. That had already happened.

And the only way out of this was through divorce. Now, that doesn't mean they got all the privileges and duties of marriage. That was just a hold on.

Wait a second, guys. This betrothal period often lasted for up to a year. And during this time, the couple lived separately and never consummated the marriage. Okay?

So, it was during this betrothal period the groom went away to prepare a place for his bride. While the bride focused on her personal preparations. Wedding garments, lamps, etc.

[6 : 32] Anyone kind of picking up on the analogy here between Jesus and the church? So, although the bride knew to expect her groom after about a year, she didn't know the exact day or hour that he was coming back.

He could come earlier. She didn't know. It was the groom's father who would give him the final approval for him to return to collect his bride. Once the home that he was building, the bridal chamber that he was preparing, was sufficiently built.

And the father would say to the son, okay, it's ready to go. You can go and get your bride and bring her back here. And for that reason, the bride kept her oil lamps ready at all times. Just in case the groom came in the night to lead the bridal procession to the home he had prepared for her.

So, when the groom would return, this was the final stage. The groom would come back. This was the final stage. This was the wedding ceremony. And the husband would bring his bride back to the home, back to the bridal chamber.

They would consummate their marriage. They would finalize their vows in front of all the... The consummation part was in front of all the witnesses. But the final vows were... Okay. You get the idea. And then they were married and they'd have this huge wedding feast that often lasted days upon end.

[7 : 41] Right? A big celebration. All right. And then this is when the married couple entered into the full duties and privileges of a married couple. That's what was going on. So, Joseph, he's betrothed to Mary.

Right? Right? So, in one sense, he is as committed as he can be. He is in a covenant relationship. He's like, man, Mary, you're my gal. You're mine. I'm yours. We're going to live together forever.

It's going to be awesome. But then there's this period where he's preparing a place for his bride. And he's looking forward to that day, that wedding day, when they're going to ultimately be together. And they're going to be able to experience the fullness of the beauty of this marriage covenant.

And he's been patient. Right? And he's a carpenter. So, you can imagine that dude is probably building a bomb house as quickly as he can. Right? It was probably a lot of dust being kicked up in Nazareth at the time.

But Joseph's also a just and upright man. So, you know that they are still virgins. It says he's just and upright. And you got to believe Mary is constantly on this guy's mind.

[8 : 45] He's looking forward to that amazing day. And let's add to the fact in all of this, all this is going on in Joseph's mind right now. Let's add to the fact that they live in a small town called Nazareth.

Right? Population 500. Around 500. I mean, really small town. Okay? I used to snowboard in an 800-person town. It was called June Lake. And the locals there, they knew everything about each other.

Right? Immanuel Kant said this about a small town. The nice thing about living in a small town is that when you don't know what you're doing, everyone else does. Right? And so there's this idea of like, man, you live in a small town.

And all of a sudden, your bride that you're betrothed to is starting to show a little bit. Okay? Word spreading around town. Now let's step into Joseph's shoes again.

How hard would it be for us to get that news? How hard would it be for us? Mary's pregnant? Who does the baby belong to? I'm sorry, the baby belongs to who?

[9 : 43] Like he got pregnant by the Holy Spirit. What does that even mean? Not only would we probably feel betrayed, we'd have to deal with the embarrassment that everyone else knew about this. Most of us probably would have responded with public outrage like an episode of Jerry Springer.

But Joseph doesn't seem to have written off the claim that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. He doesn't totally write it off. It's hard for him to believe. He hasn't totally written it off.

It is hard for him to accept. He's trying to figure out what to do. Do I divorce Mary or not? It says at the beginning of verse 20, but as he considered these things, he's weighing all these things up.

He's considering all these things. He doesn't know what to do. And there's a very real wrestle going on in Joseph's soul. What should I believe? What should I believe about this?

And I want to say, man, maybe that's you here today. Okay, you know the big claims of Jesus that Christmas says about him being born of a virgin by the Holy Spirit.

[10 : 47] And that is a tough one to say, I believe. And in one sense, you'll never believe until you take that first step of acknowledging that God's ways are higher than ours. Joseph, he knew this about God.

He grew up in Judaism. And he grew up with knowing the stories about the nation of Israel and how they became a people in the first place of God, bringing them out of Egypt with miraculous signs and wonders, things that defied natural law.

He knew that God's ways are higher than our ways. But still, man, he's at that place. He couldn't quite believe and fully accept Mary could be pregnant from the Holy Spirit.

And so the story of Christmas, the story of Christmas, it reminds us that, man, we need more than just information. Somebody can tell us about the virgin birth all the time.

And it's a hard one to believe. We need more than information. We need God to come and bring revelation. Belief is impossible without God initiating.

[11 : 49] And that's exactly what God does. Verse 20. Verse 20.

See, in the midst of Joseph's unbelief, what he's wrestling with here, God intervenes. Everyone in the room who's a Christian says, man, amen to this.

Absolutely. We totally get that. We totally understand. It took more for all of us here that believe in Jesus. It took more than just hearing about Jesus from another person.

Something more significant had to happen. God visited us with that news. God had to come and invade our life. And he had to make that news, that good news about Jesus. He had to make it real to us for us to believe.

Right? Right? My buddy, Jared Risky, right here, he was telling me when Jesus became more than just a story for him, more than just Bible stories.

[13 : 08] This guy he was serving with would talk to him about Jesus. And he invited Jared to his Bible study. And Jared started going to his Bible study. And, man, he was like learning about these, you know, these stories about Jesus.

Stuff that he had kind of grew up with in Catholic catechism and stuff like that. I mean, they were very familiar. But he still didn't fully grasp how true they were. And then one meeting, God made it real to him.

And God initiated is the best way I could describe what he described to me. And that is to say, he broke in to where Jared was. He broke into Jared's heart in that moment.

He intervened. And that doesn't mean Jared had this vision of God. Jesus didn't manifest himself like in the flesh before him. And the way he describes it, he's like, I love it. He's like, man, Jesse, I was sitting over in this papasan chair over on this side.

And this guy's praying. And all of a sudden, it's like somebody turned the heat up in the room. Like, I can't describe it. But, like, I just felt like I just became warmer and warmer and warmer.

[14 : 07] Like, God was all over me. I don't know what was going on. But God became a real person. It ceased to be just a truth that was hitting my head. It was starting to invade all my body.

I was like, oh, my goodness. And he's saying God was real. He wasn't just this idea that people talked about, you know, a long time ago. He was alive today. And he was invading my life in that moment.

It was real. And he was radical. God was intervening in that moment. He was taking that good news, that information. And he was making it alive. And that is what has happened to Joseph in this story.

He gets visited by an angel of God. He gets direct firsthand revelation. God stops and he says, no, Joseph, I need you to believe. I need you to know this. God confirms that everything he's been told about Mary is true.

She has been impregnated by the Holy Spirit. She is carrying the Son of God in her womb. Let's be honest.

[15 : 07] We'd all need a divine messenger to believe that one. God did it then, and he still does it today. When we see the Holy Spirit's activity, that's what happens.

And he's mentioned a couple times in this passage, right? That third member of the Trinity, right? Father, Son, Holy Spirit. God the Holy Spirit. He's the confirming, affirming, revealing presence of God.

That's what he does. And so when my buddy Jared was in that Bible study, and all that truth about Jesus became real, that was the Holy Spirit doing that work. He confirms and he affirms truth.

And that's why people, we just don't, when the Holy Spirit hits us like that, man, when that word becomes alive, it's not this like cold like, that was nice. And it hits us.

It changes us. It's like we respond, we have an emotional response, like unexpected emotional response. I remember reading C.S. Lewis's biography, *Surprised by Joy*, and he recalls his conversion experience.

[16 : 09] He had been talking to his buddy Tolkien for a while, and Tolkien is a, he was a believer, and he's C.S. Lewis was this atheist, who then moved to agnostic, and he's just wrestling through this idea of like, man, he's this brilliant mind, trying to grapple with the reality of, man, how could God be real?

And then he gets on this bus, and by the time he gets off the bus, all he could say is like, something had changed. And he called it *Surprised by Joy*. He's like, I had no reason to be filled with joy, but I was filled with this unexplainable joy.

I was filled with this reality that I couldn't come to grips with. And so for all his brilliance and all his smartness, he just had to say, you know what, God? I surrender. You are real.

The Holy Spirit, that's what he does. He works on us. He softens our hearts. He makes that gospel message real and powerful. And this awakening to truth is both personal, right? Like what we see with Joseph here, but it's a shared experience.

It's something that we all get to share. God comes to you, each of us, as an individual. He makes himself real, just as he came to Joseph. But that was the same revelation, if you think about it, that Joseph had that was now shared with Mary and Elizabeth and Zechariah.

[17 : 23] He wasn't alone in this revelation, and neither are we. So this one message united them to the shared reality of God's son coming in the most miraculous way.

And that's the message of Christmas. God's revelation brings peace and unity. See, it wasn't just that Jesus, the baby in Mary's womb was Jesus, and that was absolutely true.

He said, don't divorce your wife. Don't kill your relationship with Mary. Take her as your wife. Stay committed to her. And that is the power of the gospel story.

It brings people together. Ephesians 2, verse 13 to 15, it says this, but now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ, for he himself is our peace.

He has made us both one. And he's talking about two types of people that never got along, right? Insiders and outsiders. Now he's taking both of those people and he's making them one.

[18 : 23] There's a unity there and a peace that brings them together. He who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances that he might create in himself one new man in the place of two and so making peace.

man, the beauty of the Christmas story is how God brings people together through that amazing message of the gospel. But the Christmas story goes beyond just mending fractured relationships.

It is the fulfillment of the promise. It's the fulfillment of the most amazing promise. And let's read verses 21 to 23 again. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, somebody who prophesied this centuries ago.

Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call his name Emmanuel which means God with us.

Let's stop and realize the gravity of these words in Joseph's ears. Let's put ourselves in his place, right? It's easy to distance ourselves from first century Nazareth but let's go back and put ourselves in that place, right?

[19 : 47] See, in that moment God had not been speaking to Israel for over 400 years. Israel had this history, right? They came out of Egypt, they were God's people but they were idolatrous.

God said, hey, a part of me being your God and you being my people is you need to worship me and worship me alone. But Israel was idolatrous and they chased after other gods and they worshiped other gods besides the Lord their God.

And so God says, guys, through his prophets, he kept sending his prophets again and again, return to me, repent, stop doing that. But Israel wouldn't listen. God's people would cheat on him again and again and again and then finally God said, I have to send you away.

Sent them out of the land. Just like Joseph was about to do with Mary. See, the phrase divorce her quietly literally means to send her away secretly.

God sent his people away from their land and from his presence because they continued in sin. And over time, he brought them back home, back into the land of Israel, but his presence wasn't there.

[20 : 56] God was silent. There was no prophets. There was no prophecy. Nothing had happened between Malachi and Matthew. They call that the 400 years of silence. And then God's speaking.

Angels showing up. Stuff's happening. Like, this is all coming around when Jesus is conceived in Mary's womb. And this is what God is saying to Joseph here.

And though you are guilty of infidelity, though your nation, though your people have a long history of turning away from me and not turning to me, I am coming back to be with you.

I am fully committed to you. I am going to fully forgive your sins. I'm all in. And then, Jesus' name, right, his very name is God is salvation.

But he's also called Emmanuel, God with us. God is telling Joseph that there is something much bigger going on here than just his problem. God's salvation and his presence has arrived.

[21 : 58] God gives us what we want by providing what we need. That's what it's talking about here. God gives us what we want by providing what we need. Joseph, man, he wanted Mary.

But what he needed was insight and revelation of the situation. Man, we want God to be real. We want God to be with us. But we need to be saved from our sins.

Jesus isn't one or the other, man. He is both. That's the beauty of this. He came for what we needed, salvation. Salvation from sin in order to give us what we want, what our souls have been aching for.

God with us. And this is offered as a gift. Joseph didn't deserve it. Mary didn't earn it. Israel didn't deserve it.

Israel didn't earn it and neither do we. And we, when we are confronted with this good news, when we are confronted with the power of salvation and the presence of God, it changes us.

[22 : 57] It changes the game. And there's only one response to this and that's surrender. God's revelation requires your surrender. Verse 24, when Joseph woke from 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 he called his name Jesus. See, we, Joseph responded with obedience.

Joseph responded with surrender. It would have probably been a lot easier to go through with a divorce and say, no, too crazy, can't do this. But faith leads us to obedience.

Faith leads us to surrender. See, we're saved by faith alone. That's what we believe as Christians. But as Martin Luther said, it's not a faith that is alone. God gives revelation.

Absolutely. God saves us by faith. He gives us the faith to believe but that faith requires our surrender. It requires our response. The life of faith, it begins with surrender and the life of faith continues in surrender.

[24 : 02] Surrender requires trust and patience. And we see that in Joseph here, with Joseph here, right? Joseph didn't know Mary until Jesus was born, right?

How can you imagine that? my wife, funny story, one of our friends had come back from a deployment.

I think it was like six or seven months and we were happy to see them and so we were talking to the happy couple that were reunited and Haley just asked them this funny question. So what was the first thing you did when you got back?

They kind of looked at us with eyes like, but they had to wait. I mean, Joseph, you look at this. I mean, the dude had the patience of Joe.

The life of faith, the life of surrender to God's will and God's way is like that. It's patient anticipation. Joseph waited. He had been waiting for his wedding day.

[25 : 05] He's a young guy. He's already thinking about that all the time and just when it seems like he's hit that final stretch and sprinting towards the finish line, God says, hold on, you got to run a few more laps.

That would have been tough as the band comes up. Maybe you are going through something right now. There's a lot of people going through different stuff in this room.

Maybe you're going through something right now and you can relate to that. You have been crying out, man, Lord, how long? Lord, where are you? Why are you silent? When is this going to end? I know some of you are in the middle of very difficult seasons, tough seasons.

You've been crying out to God. You've been, man, you needed God to intervene yesterday and he hasn't. Maybe you're wondering, man, God, why are you silent? Are you here today wrestling with what to do like Joseph?

As Christians, we get to look back on Joseph's life. We get to see the full picture. We get to see in this little story of Jesus' birth, birth, the goodness and the faithfulness of God, right?

[26 : 13] See, that's the thing. We can't measure God's faithfulness in just a moment. Man, you may be feeling like right now God's taking forever, but we don't measure God's faithfulness based on our one circumstance.

God's faithfulness is measured in lifetimes, across generations and across history. And when you look back over your shoulder, when you look back over your life, when you look back over the generations, when you look back over history, what you see is a God who is faithful again and again and again and again.

You may not be living in his deliverance just yet, but one day you will. One day we're all going to be living in that deliverance in the fullness of his kingdom. Until then, we know this, God is with us.

God is with us right now. He's with you right now in every circumstance, in every moment. As we come and respond today by taking communion, let's remember that.

Let's remember that Jesus is God with us. He came. He put on flesh and blood. He came in flesh and blood. He surrendered to the Father's will to save us.

[27 : 28] He did that. He did that. His body broken, the bread that we eat, His body broken, His blood shed, the cup that we drink, it reminds us, man, He did that for us.

Jesus is God's salvation. And He is God with us. The whole idea of communion is that idea of coming and being one with God. And it's a reminder that we don't have that promise just because we do this.

We do this because it points us back to that reality that we are one with God because of Jesus Christ. Let's be thankful for that. If you're here and you're not a Christian, man, I hope today that you're wrestling.

You're in that moment where you're wrestling like Joseph was. Just thinking, my God, this is hard to believe. And I'm praying like, man, God makes that real today like He did with my buddy Jared years ago.

And He makes that truth real today. And your response is faith. your response is, Lord, I believe. And that becomes your confession.

[28 : 34] Not your confession for the moment, but confession for your lifetime. And you respond with surrender. Not surrender just for the moment, but surrender for a lifetime.

And it is a beautiful thing. Let's pray. Lord, as we consider our response today, we want to thank you, God, that you are faithful.

We want to thank you, God, that your ways are higher than our ways. You do the unexpected because you're God. You don't have to live by our standards.

You don't have to act and behave according to what we think you should do. Lord, you are God. And so we see the story of Christmas. It may be a story that we look back on.

It may be hard to believe, but Lord, it is true. And Christmas isn't just a reminder that, man, you came and you did some awesome stuff and it must have been a lot of fun back then.

[29 : 36] Man, when you invade our lives, it is a bit disruptive. It changes the game. But we do that because we realize, man, your promise of salvation invades us, invades our space, invades our lives.

We realize it is true and our only proper response is love and worship and surrender. Amen.