

Incarnation – The Virgin Birth

Matt. 1:18-24

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Mary and Joseph were nothing special. Two poor Jewish kids who grew up on the wrong side of the tracks. No historical record was kept of their parents or grandparents because they didn't do anything to be remembered for. Sounds harsh, but that is how history works. Instead, Mary pops up onto the scene, and we all scratch our heads and ask, why her? The thing about Mary is the power of quiet faithfulness. She will go from nothing special to being called blessed by all generations. All because she was quietly faithful. Joseph is like Mary in that way: quietly faithful and a person who desires to honor God in all that he does. In fact, when he finds himself in one of the most challenging scenarios a person can find themselves in, he seeks to honor God and those affected by it all. Matthew will tell us he is a "just" man. We can look at their story and the amazing and miraculous situation that they find themselves in and miss what is truly profound: two regular people just trying to be faithful. And when God shows up in a big way, they operate with a purposeful responsiveness that flows from the conviction of their identity. In other words, as children of God, they lived in a way that reflected that identity.

They aren't the only ones who are operating in faithfulness, either. The baby that is about to be born to them, Jesus, the very Son of God, is the very picture of faithfulness. In his incarnation (earthly life) Jesus was faithful to the Father's will and plan and humbled himself to serve humanity who had rejected him. He is Emmanuel, God with us. When we look at this whole story, it is hard for us not to see that **faithfulness flows into a regular life of purposeful responsiveness.**

1. A faithful remnant.

a. Mary and Joseph - Purposefully Responsive

- i. In Advent ... We see a faithful remnant being responsive to God's plan of redemption.
 1. Up to this point it has been 400 years since God had spoken through a prophet. **This is often known as the intertestamental period or the period of silence.**
 2. In these 400 years, while God is said to have been "silent," he was still or inactive.
 - a. The Greeks would eventually give way to the Romans, and the Romans would set the world stage for the declaration of the gospel. → Roman roads, peace treaties, and common languages would all mean that by the time of the cross, the news of the resurrection could travel freely and quickly to the far corners of the Roman empire.

- b. So, yes, God did not speak through a prophet in this period, but he was by no means still, inactive, or distant from his people.
 - 3. **There would always be a faithful remnant. → This is something we see when we read through the latter prophets / historical books in the OT.**
 - a. In Esther, Nehemiah, and Malachi, there is always a remnant of faithful people.
 - b. Joseph and Mary are part of that faithful remnant that continued through the period of silence.
- ii. **Luke focuses on Mary's perspective and Matthew focuses on Joseph's.**
 - 1. **Mary** – “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38)
 - 2. **Joseph** – “being a just man...” (Matt. 1:19)
 - a. Both we God-honoring and God-fearing people who were clearly living faithfully in the little things and the everyday things of life.
 - b. Jesus speaks about this type of life in the parable of the dishonest manager: ¹⁰ **“One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much.”** (Lk. 16:10)
 - c. **Simply, Mary and Joseph were normal people, striving to be faithful, and responded as such when God called on them. I.e., They were purposely responsive.**
- b. **Purposeful responsiveness is not:**
 - i. **Meeting every possible need.**
 - 1. Just pause and consider the attitude and posture that must come along with thinking that you or I could meet every possible need that comes our way.
 - a. It is either blind arrogance or total naivety.
 - b. Blind arrogance is living with a posture of outsized ability and capacity. I.e., Thinking and acting as if you are the savior.
 - c. Total naivety is essentially the good-intentioned but harmful action of living without rest or boundaries.
- c. **Purposeful responsiveness is:**
 - i. Living within my God-given calling as an ambassador of reconciliation. (cf. 2 Cor. 5:16-21)
 - 1. V. 20 - ²⁰ **Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.**
 - 2. **If God is making his appeal through you and me, how does that inform my day-to-day life and my priorities?**
 - ii. Considering how I might use my resources (time, talents, and treasure) for the glory of God and the good of others.
 - iii. Trusting the Holy Spirit to guide, prompt, and exhort you towards righteous action.

2. Humility - God becoming human.

- a. The virgin birth. (v.18)
 - i. **The promise – Isaiah 7:14 - Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.**

1. Remember this promise was made in the wake of Ahaz's disobedience and disregard for the Lord's kindness and care for him and the people of Judah. Advent is a season when we remember that God is faithful even when mankind is not.
- b. **To many in our day, such a miracle of conception is too difficult to accept, but it was scandalous even in the first century, particularly in its Jewish context. The Jews had no sympathy for the myths of the Greeks, nor for the immoral sexual activity of their gods.** Moreover, in a culture extremely sensitive to sexual propriety, the virgin birth of Jesus as it is portrayed in the Gospels is simply not the kind of story that the early Christians would have made up. **From the earliest days stories were circulating about the illegitimacy of the birth of Jesus,**¹ and the Christians would have been foolish to throw fuel on the fire by preserving a story such as this. It was undoubtedly considered true and important in understanding who Jesus was.²
 - i. Matthew and Luke both claim that Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit of God (Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:35). If this sounds unbelievable to us, it was for them as well! **It took an angel showing up to convince both Mary and Joseph that a virgin could have a baby.**³
- c. **A new act of creation via the Holy Spirit –**
 - i. **The virgin birth also points to Jesus' conception as a new act of creation by God. Unlike pagan stories, the Gospels avoid all sexual imagery; nor do they depict the Holy Spirit as the male partner in some celestial marriage.** The picture here is not one of marriage but of creation, for the Holy Spirit who would "overshadow" Mary was the same Holy Spirit who moved over the face of the deep in the Genesis account of the creation of the cosmos (Gen. 1:2). **He acted as God's agent when he first made the world. Thus, the virgin birth represents a new act of God within the natural order, creating nothing less than a new Adam, one untainted by sin** (1 Cor. 15:47).⁴
- d. **The scandal of this moment: The motivation of love lived out.**
 - i. Love is the fuel that drives the engine of our obedience.
 1. I.e., Obedience is God's love language.
 2. We see this in the incarnation. → The Son obeyed the Father, took on human flesh, and gave his life so that we might have life.
 - ii. The word have translated *engaged or betrothed* indicates a firm commitment, normally undertaken a year before marriage. During that year the girl remained with her own family, but the tie established was a strong one and was really the first part of marriage. A betrothed woman could be punished as an adulteress (Deut. 22:23–24; the punishment of "a virgin who is not betrothed" was different, vv. 28–29).⁵
 1. This was a legally binding agreement that had significant social and familial ramifications if it was broken.
 - iii. Let's come back to Joseph's character: "A just man..." (v.19)
 1. In order to divorce Mary, Joseph would have had to go through a public process that involved the elders of their community. Likely, Joseph would have taken

¹ Cf. John 8:41 and Jewish attacks mentioned in Origen, *Against Celsus* (1.28).

² EFCA. *Evangelical Convictions*, 2nd Edition (p. 124). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition.

³ McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Is Christmas Unbelievable?: Four Questions Everyone Should Ask About the World's Most Famous Story*. The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

⁴ EFCA. *Evangelical Convictions*, 2nd Edition (p. 125). Free Church Publications. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 26–27.

Mary down to the elders at the gate of the city, publicly declared what had happened, there would be some discussion as to the validity of the accusation, and then the elders would have ruled their judgment. All of this would have been scandalous and embarrassing for both of them but utterly devastating for Mary.

2. Instead of doing that, Joseph being kind and merciful (i.e., just) thought to divorce Mary quietly. → There would be scandal, but Joseph wanted to avoid as much as possible.
 - a. **Joseph, Mary's husband, is called *just***, which probably means that he was careful in his observance of the law. Joseph, being *just*, saw that he was unable to consummate the marriage, but he did not want to be harsh. **Perhaps we should say that for Joseph being just before God included an element of mercy (the "just man" is compassionate, Ps. 37:21).**⁶
 - b. **This is key to understanding Joseph → But his concern for the law did not lead him to the conclusion that he must humiliate the young lady who, he thought, had offended.**⁷
 - i. How might we apply this same approach to those (believers and non-believers) in our lives?
 - ii. That is, how might we walk in righteousness and in grace encourage others to do the same without humiliating them?
 1. Joseph clearly thought about his actions through the lens of dignity. → He didn't excuse what he thought Mary had done, but he also didn't seek to destroy her dignity.
 2. We live in a cultural moment that says, to give dignity is to affirm and active foster disordered desires.
 3. The Bible says to give dignity it to not engage or encourage disordered desires, and to treat others with compassion as we struggle.
 - a. There is a significant difference between these two things.
 - c. **What we see in Joseph is humility that comes from a transformed identity as a child of God.**

e. What is humility?

- i. Many years ago, I heard a helpful definition, it goes, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less often."
- ii. Jesus who had no reason to think less of himself, did not consider equality with God something to be retained and came to earth in the most humble and vulnerable position, a baby.
 1. Why? Because he loves us.
 2. Rewind – Karl Barth on the primary function of the Church, "The church is to first and foremost declare God's love for humanity."
- iii. Ultimately, humility is a profoundly loving act. → Why?

⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 27–28.

⁷ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 27–28.

1. It speaks of the value of another person that you or I wouldn't demand our way instead, listen and care for them.
 - a. **Caution** – Humility doesn't excuse or enable living in our disordered desires.
 - b. **Remember** – **The Bible gives us a better vision for life, time and time again. It does that two ways:**
 - i. Positive encouragement – Sections that positively teach this better vision for life.
 - ii. Characters that show us the consequences of not living in the framework God has provided for life.
2. Humility says, my greatest good is not divorced from your greatest good.
 - a. Again, we see this in the incarnation – Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be retained for himself... (Phil 2:4-11)
 - b. **⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.**
3. Humility leads me to a posture of willing cooperation with God. Or, in other words, a life of Godly purposeful responsiveness.

3. Willing Cooperation?

- a. What should purposeful responsiveness and willing cooperation look like for me? → Let's again look at Mary and Joseph.
 - i. They were two poor Jewish kids trying to cobble a life together and honor God.
 - ii. Mary and Joseph's life and story would have been regarded as normal, mundane, and boring by all accounts historically speaking. They were a poor Jewish couple going about the regular things of life, with hearts that were soft to the Lord.
- b. **When we look at their life, we need to ask:**
 - i. **If I was only known for living a quiet life and love for God, is that a life worth living in the scope of eternity?**
 1. If we are a people who believe in eternal life, do our priorities truly reflect that?
 - a. Or, do we live, act, and think like people who do not believe in eternity, while having a little "insurance card" in our back pocket, just in case.
 - b. This is the question of living with a marked difference. That is, others are able to see something different about you and me because of Christ.
 - c. This is not to say that wealth or having nice things is bad and antithetical to being a Christian, they are not. → In fact, Paul tells us that God has given some a unique gift for financial contribution, and if you have that gift, be generous! (Rom. 12:8)

2. This is to consider seriously my response towards opportunities to be purposefully responsive with my resources.
 - a. Am I being generous with my time, talents, and treasure, or am I just going through the motions with it all?
 - i. I.e., How am I being stretched?
3. The challenge to all of this is what posture and motivation do I have in being generous, purposefully responsive, or stretched?
 - a. Humility helps us stay focused on the Lord.
- ii. **What is it about the boring, normal, and regular things of life that cause us to live in anxiety?**
 1. Maybe this question of living a quiet life is giving you anxiety? Or, perhaps it feels inadequate or insufficient? → Why?
 2. As a culture we obsess over ideals of success and fame. One moment we are chastising CEOs of major companies and the very next moment, praising them for their genius, emotional intelligence, and financial success.
 3. We read countless books on leadership and talk very little about servanthood.
 - a. Yes, Paul teaches us that leadership is a spiritual gift for some, but he reminds us that we are to be like Christ who came not be served, but to serve.
 - b. We are called to follow Christ as his disciples and serve him.
 - c. Jesus himself tells us, ²⁵ **And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶ But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. ²⁷ For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves. (Lk. 22:25-27)**
- c. **Humility – the trait that positions us to join the Lord in his work.**
 - i. Humility in action – When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him...
 1. Am I humble to submit myself to the Lord’s plans for my day, or do I act as if my day is all up to me?
 2. When the Lord puts an opportunity in my path, what is my response?
 3. Do I believe that God not only wants to commune with me daily, but also has purposes for my regular life?
 - a. Consider all of the people that I come in contact with on a daily basis. If I am Christ ambassador, what message are they receiving about Jesus?
 - ii. Faithfulness comes from a regular life of purposeful responsiveness.