

Sermon Text for Christmas Eve 2016

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(Note: There Is No Audio On The Church Website For This Service)

Isaiah 7:10-14, Matthew 1:18-25

Christmas – The Story

I had the opportunity to speak to the Lion's Club this past week and I talked about the history of Christmas. Why do we celebrate Christmas on December 25 when Luke tells us that the shepherds were keeping their flocks at night and Palestinian Christians know very well that in December you don't keep your flocks out at night or they might die from the cold. I learned a lot from putting together that presentation, I learned to separate urban legend from Scripture. I looked over my notes and I noticed that I spoke more about Santa than I did about Jesus. Besides Henry Miller, who knows who gave Santa his red outfit? That's right, Coca Cola.

So what is the story of Christmas? Matthew gives us the most stripped down, simple version without many details about Jesus' birth. The angel in Matthew comes to Joseph, not Mary, that's different from what we know in the quaint folksy Christmas story. Mary is a virgin and remains a virgin even after her marriage to Joseph. More on that tomorrow when you get the rest of the story. There are no mangers, no shepherds, no journeys on a donkey or a camel, and the wise men don't come around yet either. Not much is said at all about the birth of Jesus, just that he was born.

Tonight, this story, Christmas, the story, is much less about the birth of a baby boy, which we celebrate almost exclusively, and much more about that boy himself. When you leave here tonight you should be able to answer the primary question of Christmas: who is and who will be that boy? Christmas is about the boy and that is often drowned out and as you go into the dark after a year of sifting through the competing claims and messages from culture and society. After a year of so much loud chatter in our ears surrounding the election, the messages from the stores wanting you to buy, the messages from the extended family who want all of your time, because family is complicated. After you sift through all of it you'll find the Christmas story is all about Jesus who was born to save us from our sins. It is that simple.

The Christmas story in Matthew begins in vs.18. That verse begins with, the birth of Jesus. The word birth is *egeneto* in the Greek, which is the word from which we get the first book of the Bible Genesis. You follow? On top that, vs.1 starts exactly the same way as vs.18. The story of the Genesis of Jesus. The story of the very beginning of Jesus, the story of Jesus' birth, that is the Christmas story.

In vs.18 and vs.1 Jesus is called the Messiah which in Greek is Christos. The Messiah, what is that and what does it have to do with Christmas and the Christmas story? The Messiah is the one who was foretold in Isaiah and other parts of the OT who was to come and deliver the people of God. Everyone in Jesus' day and in Jesus' community was waiting for the Messiah. Every now and then in Jesus' day and the centuries surrounding his time on the earth, people and soldiers would spring up from within the Jesus population and say, I'm the Messiah, follow me in a revolt against Rome. And they would begin an uprising which would be mercilessly crushed by Rome and the leaders would be put on a cross and crucified as enemies of the state. That happened.

So calling Jesus the Christ meant he was supposed to be the one promised who would truly lead a successful revolt against Rome and put God's own people and God's nation back in power. But it was important that the Messiah come from the same heritage and background as King David. He was the one who truly established the glory days of Israel. The next Messiah will rule like David and so must be a descendant of David. Vs.1-17 checks all of those boxes and we read through his genealogy.

Later in vs. 20 we see that confirmed once again as Joseph is called: Son of David and if the father Joseph is the Son of David then the son Jesus will also be the son of David. So the story begins that Mary and Joseph are engaged. Isn't that sweet? They changed their status on facebook, a ring was given, well, no actually, there was much more of a formal process in an engagement back in that day. The marriages were arranged and sons could be married off as early as 13 and the daughters as early as 12. The man would, boy really, would go to the house of the woman, girl really, and there he would sign a contract with the father of the woman promising a certain dowry when they were married. Once that formal sealing of the promise was made they were engaged, but they were devoted to each other as if they were married. The man returned back to his house and they could get married at any time, normally it was well within a year. Your engagement was under contract. You couldn't break that contract, it would be the same as divorce and it was not allowed during the engagement period. And if the woman was involved in any extracurricular activity, then it was the same as adultery. So no bachelor or bachelorette parties. No last minutes sowing of the oats.

The plot thickens as we are still in vs. 18. She is legally bound to him when "she was found to be with child." It sounds almost as if by accident she was found to be with child. Well, as you can imagine this is a problem. It is a bigger problem when you read Deuteronomy 22:23-24 which states: If there is a young woman, a virgin already engaged to be married and a

man meets her in the town and lies with her, you shall bring both of them to the gate of the town and stone them to death. This Christmas story has everything, right? This is a problem because we know how women get pregnant and it doesn't just happen out of thin air, you don't just find yourself to be pregnant. Vs. 18, found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Now the law is clear and vs.19 tells us that Joseph is a law abiding citizen, he was righteous is what it states. Righteous means that he followed what was right, he followed the law. The law said that she was to be stoned, but we see a tender side to Joseph and he didn't want to shame her publicly, which was worse than death itself. It had further reaching repercussions to her family. For Joseph, a righteous man, stability is more important than emotion. We don't know if he loved Mary, I doubt it, he barely knew her, she was 12, he was 13 still in the stages where boys are yukky and girls are gross.

The stage is set, the Christmas story finds itself right at the apex. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream right after he had decided what the right thing to do would be. An angel appearing to Joseph in a dream is not unusual. Three times Joseph is approached by an angel in Matthew and each time he is commanded to go and do something: Take her home as your wife, leave your home and go to Egypt, return back to your home land.

You see, for us when we have a dream we think it speaks more to our past or to our present rather than being predictive or understand it to speak to our future. That's the way that people in Jesus' day understood dreams, as being predictive, as a road map to follow for your future.

The angel tells Joseph, do not be afraid. The decision you made to divorce her quietly is admirable, but it is a decision made out of fear. Fear of what the voices of our families, friends, and acquaintances might say. Joseph was afraid of damaged goods and all the realities that carries with it. Fear is what drove his decision. Fear is the great antagonist in the Christmas story. It pops up again and again with Mary and the shepherds. We fear a truck that will destroy a Christmas market and all the people that surround it, we fear a future for our nation where civic discourse has broken down, we fear so many things and it is that fear which triggers our decisions. We all need that angel when we are confused, bewildered, angry, saddened, feeling betrayed. We need that angel who will first tell us to not fear and then tell us what to do.

If you've been praying those 5 minutes a day you should be hearing voices by now, just like Joseph. An angel who steps in and assures us that it is all going as planned. It is under control.

And then we come to the gripping climax of the story in vs. 21. The Christmas story we hear is about a son, and Joseph is told the specific name that he is to give him and it is Jesus. Who needs an ultrasound, and a baby book with names when you have an angel who tells ut aht it's a boy and here's his name and this is what his name means.

Jesus is given that name because it means God saves and Jesus will save his people from their sins. The primary purpose of Jesus, the story goes, is that he is Savior. Oh, we know that he is also called Prince of Peace, Mighty Counselor, Everlasting Father, but here we read his name will be called Jesus, just Jesus, because he will save his people from their sin.

Do you understand the Christmas story? It really isn't about how Jesus was born, or where Jesus was born, or who was there when Jesus was born, we love those details and those aspects of the story. The Christmas story is about what this Jesus did.

When Jesus was born he was immediately rejected because we tend to complicate the Christmas story. Jesus' people, whom he came to serve, thought the Christmas story was all about liberation from Rome when it was really about freedom from sin. We complicate the story. We are still complicating this story, and not all of it is our fault. It is hard to think about a Savior whose primary purpose is describe as coming to forgive our sins when we can't pay our Christmas bills. We don't think of a Savior when this is our first Christmas alone, or without a spouse, or another loved one. It is hard to see a Savior when so much more is happening around us.

The angel had to remind Joseph of whom Jesus would be in the face of his fear. The simple story of Christmas is that we have a Savior, our sins are washed clean and we have been saved from the repercussions of that sin, which is death. When our sins are forgiven we have a relationship with our Creator God which is whole and complete, there is no separation. Amen.