

Trinity Lutheran Church, Gillette, WY
December 24, 2008

Immanuel

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen. The text for the sermon comes from the Gospel, which was read earlier.

It is probably safe to say that most Christians are more familiar with Luke's account of Jesus' birth than with Matthew's account. Luke 2 is usually what people hear recited by children in Christmas Eve services; very often it is also read on Christmas Day. All too often Matthew's account of Jesus' birth is bypassed. A comparison of the two accounts of course shows that the Evangelist Matthew's record of the birth of God's Son is much briefer than Luke's. Matthew does not mention many of the details we have come to associate with Christ's birth. Matthew's God-given task was simply to relate the facts of the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ. Matthew now introduces his background from a different angle: in the story of Jesus' godly stepfather, he introduces the miraculous and moral character of Jesus' birth. With that said, we begin our text: *"When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit."*

Joseph and Mary had promised their lives to each other as husband and wife, and in God's eyes that was the beginning of their marriage. According to custom, though, they would not live together as husband and wife until a certain time period had elapsed. That is the time Matthew zeroes in on. Joseph learned that Mary had become pregnant. Christ "was conceived by the Holy Spirit," as we say in the Apostles' Creed. This is certainly "the mystery of Christ's incarnation." Human reason cannot fathom how Mary

could become pregnant through the working of the Holy Spirit. God-given faith, though, accepts that explanation and marvels at God's power.

Joseph was left with a couple of options. Option 1 was that he could accept the child as his own. With that would come a certain stigma, since he and Mary were only betrothed – meaning that though they were married in the eyes of God, yet not married in the eyes of the government, the stigma would be that he willingly married a woman who had not only cheated on him with another man, she became pregnant by that man as well. It would not be Joseph's responsibility to care for this child, since he has no tie to the child.

Option 2 would be to divorce her. This would have been a very simple and easy thing to do. It would have meant little difficulty for Joseph should he do that. What's more, it would have been his right to do so since Mary was the one who cheated on him. Mary, a less-than second-class citizen would have born all the fault and the law would have sided with Joseph because he was a male. In ancient Judaism, betrothals (unlike our modern engagements) were as binding as marriage; an economic transaction had united the couple. Even though they had not yet consummated the marriage, their betrothal could be ended only by divorce or by the death of one party. Unfaithfulness, however, was universally regarded as grounds for divorce, and Jewish law, like Roman law and all ancient Mediterranean custom, would have expected Joseph to divorce Mary.

Option 3 would be to have Mary put to death for her act of infidelity. Because of the law of the land, death would have been an option. According to Deuteronomy 22, the life of Mary (and ultimately Jesus) could have been in jeopardy if Joseph had wanted to

press the issue. Joseph did not desire any harm to come to Mary because he was a just man.

What happened next was the angelic visitation to Joseph in a dream. *“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.”* Here we see how an angel served the Lord while He was still in Mary’s womb. The angel redirected Joseph’s intended course of action. The angel reminded Joseph that he was a son of David. It was implied in those words that if the Savior were to come from David’s line as promised, Mary and he needed to remain together as husband and wife. Joseph was prevented from jumping to any more false conclusions about Mary by being informed about the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit within her.

This Son born to Joseph and Mary is the Son born to all creation, to you and to me. It is the Son born to live a sinless life in your place. It is the Son born to die in your place. It is the Son born to be raised from the dead. It is the Son *“born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.”* My friends, this Child whose birth we are preparing to celebrate in a few hours is like no other child that ever has been, is, or ever will be. This is the very Son of God made flesh for you. This is the very Son of God who came to take your sins upon Himself. This is Jesus, the Lord saves. Jesus came into the world not merely to save one particular people or race. He came to save the crowd, the whole crowd, all the people, the people as a nation. He came to save you. He is the Messiah which the prophet Isaiah had foretold hundreds of years before; He is Immanuel, God with us.

Martin Luther was an avid hymn writer. One of his longest hymns was the Christmas hymn, “From Heaven Above to Earth I Come.” In that hymn, Luther writes the following stanza: *“This is the Christ, our God Most High, Who hears your sad and bitter cry; He will Himself your Savior be From all your sins to set you free.”* This one stanza encapsulates why Christ came: to set you free from all of your sins. This is what was foretold all the way back in Genesis. They had been waiting and waiting for the promised Messiah and now here He was; yet it wasn’t the Messiah that they had expected. No one had expected the Messiah to be born in a lowly manger amongst animals. No one had expected the Messiah to be born to such lowly parents, yet that is precisely how this Savior of the nations was born. He was born to earthly parents and lived an earthly life for all those here on earth, for you and for me.

That is who the Messiah IS and not who we WANT the Messiah to be. We want the Messiah to be one who will make all of our problems disappear, someone who will make our lives easier. That is not the Messiah promised in the Scriptures. The Messiah that is promised of in the Scriptures is One who would give His life for the life of God’s creation. St. Matthew writes, *“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

If there is one word to remember, it is the simple word “trust.” Trust the Lord. It is here, in the manger, where God breaks into our lives and makes Christmas the vital, living experience He intended it to be when Jesus was born in flesh and blood two thousand years ago. Trust, trust Him... trust Him by placing everything you are and have into His hands, knowing that He is the only one who is trustworthy. Trust that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and the Savior of those who call upon His name.

Because of the gift God has given to us through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, we are bold to sing with Martin Luther, *“All this for us our God has done Granting love through His Son. And sing His praise with endless voice. Alleluia!”* In Jesus name, amen. Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, amen.