



Good morning and Merry Christmas! Today we start a short message series called “Fear Not.” We’re looking at two different versions of the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. In each of these Gospel stories, we see an angel appear to different people, and the first thing that the angel always says is, “Fear not.” In just a few days, on Christmas Eve, we’re going to see the angel appear to a band of shepherds and the angel says, “Fear not. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.”

We call fear by many names. We call it worry, tension, anxiety, and stress. One study looked at 500 different people and discovered 7,000 unique fears. On average, every person carries with them 14 different fears. One study said that the greatest fear people have is the fear of being alone. Fear is not some minor thing, it’s an absolutely critical issue. The problem with fear is that it’s contagious, it’s limiting, and it’s draining. Fear and worry reveal the things we love and value. Our fears often point out our insatiable quest for control and our sense of aloneness. So, phobias, bad dreams, stress, being busy and driven, depression, anger, overprotection and superstition are all tied to fear. What do your fears say you trust in? What do your fears say you love?

Fear is also a spiritual matter. People often say, “Fear is the absence of faith.” I would argue that fear is actually faith. It’s just faith in the wrong things. You could say fear is placing your faith in the “what ifs” of life. Things like, What if the economy falls apart again? What if I lose my job? What if someone I love gets cancer? What if I never get married? And the fears just go on and on—What if...? What if...? What if...? Fear is often placing our faith in worst-case scenarios. I do that all the time. Recently, my daughter had a little rash under her nose and I was convinced it was skin cancer! Thankfully my wife told me to chill out and the rash went away.

The good news is, according to 2 Timothy 1:7, **“God has not given us...”** what? **“God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of...”** what? **“Of power and of love and self-discipline.”** Today I want to talk to you about that fear that drives us all. Turn to Matthew chapter 1. We’re going to see an angel appear to Joseph and talk about how the Christmas story helps us to overcome our fears.

The Virgin Birth Announced

The way Joseph saw it

In Matthew 1:18-25 the supernatural virgin birth is announced to Joseph. Joseph is engaged to be married to a young, teenage

virgin girl named Mary. Now, in that time in history engagements were much different. Today, if you’re engaged and something goes wrong, you can just break off the engagement. Back then, an engagement was actually a binding agreement. A couple would be engaged for a year’s period of time, and if they wanted to break off the engagement, they actually had to file for a divorce. The only other way to get out of an engagement would be to die. And the engagement was so serious that if one of the two people died, the other one would be considered a widow or a widower.

With that in mind, we pick up the story in Matthew 1:18. This is the Apostle Matthew’s version of the birth of Jesus Christ. He said,

“This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.”

For a moment, let’s get into the minds of Joseph and Mary. If you think about it, you have to admit that it had to be a really hard conversation. I imagine Mary sitting down with her fiancée and saying, “Joey, honey bunches, I’ve got something to tell you. I’m pregnant. But don – don – don – don’t – don’t jump to conclusions! The good news is, it’s by the Holy Spirit!” Now, if I’m Joseph, I’m thinking, “And how long did it take you to come up with this story? Are you kidding me? Don’t give me the Holy Spirit stuff! I saw the way that guy was checking you out, at the well!”

So, you have to admit that from a human perspective, Joseph only has two options. If you factor out the possibility that God actually did that, he’s got two options: My fiancé is crazy or she’s a liar. And I don’t want to marry someone who’s crazy or a liar. Joseph must have asked himself, “Okay, if I stay with this girl, what’s everybody going to say? What are they going to think about us? Why is this happening to me?” To be pregnant out of wedlock in that day was a great sin, one punishable by death. They could stone you for that.

In verse 19, we see how the story unfolds,

“Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.”

Joseph was a man of integrity and really did love Mary. Divorcing her quietly was a noble and honoring thing to do. What he’s

thinking is, "I'm not going to expose her to public shame. I'm not going to say to everybody, she cheated on me, stone her to death." He loves her and thinks, maybe she can go have this baby somewhere else, and hopefully start over, and I'll start over, and we'll both move on with our lives.

Joseph is about to learn one of the most important life lessons for those who want to honor God. He's going to learn that pleasing God often means disappointing people. He's going to learn the powerful truth that if you want to obey God, there will be many times when other people will not agree and they will not understand. Pleasing God means obeying him even when it doesn't make any sense from a human perspective.

The same is true with our fears. Obeying God sometimes means walking through your fears with faith. If you are afraid of the future or fearful of the unknown, Joseph's story is a great encouragement for us. From his perspective, none of this makes sense. He's afraid of what this pregnancy will mean for him and his fiancé, so he is going to work out a way to make it all go away. He's operating with fear, not faith. But God was clearly at work too. God was about to deal with his fear.

The way God saw it

In verses 20 and 21 we see the way God saw these events,

"But after he [Joseph] had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, [fear not].'"

The King James Version says, "Fear not." My version says, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Verse 21 is so powerful:

"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

At this moment, when Joseph awakes from his dream, you have to imagine the pendulum swing of emotions inside his mind, "My gosh, for centuries and centuries it's been prophesied that a Messiah would come, and here an angel of the Lord has told me that I get to be a part of the greatest event in history."

What's amazing to me is that Mary and Joseph had very little information about God's plan. The angel said, "You're going to have a boy, name him Jesus. He's going to save people from their sins. That's what his name means." And that's it. No details, like, "How are we going to raise Him? How are we going to discipline Him? Are we going to spank Him, or put Him in time out? We're dealing with the Son of God here. Okay, so He's the perfect Son of God. Maybe He'll spank us, or put us in time out. There's no details given about how they're going to do this." It's all pretty incredible.

And I think in all of our lives, when we are afraid, when we are struggling with fear, there are times when we want more details

about what God is doing, times where we say to God, "Show me the details, then I won't be so afraid." But from God's view he's saying, "You can't handle the details. If I showed you everything, you'd be even more fearful and wouldn't even take the first step."

Here's something else I'm learning in the Christmas story, something else that helps me to "Fear Not." We don't have to understand completely to obey immediately. We don't have to see the whole picture to put the first puzzle piece in place and trust God with the rest. Joseph learned, outcome is God's responsibility and obedience is our responsibility. We see Joseph's obedience in verses 24-25,

"When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."

Immanuel—God With Us

A prophecy revealed

In Matthew's account of the virgin birth, he does something very important that I want to circle back on because this truth will also help us to "Fear Not." Matthew reflects back on Old Testament prophecy in verse 22-23. He writes,

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'" (which means "God with us").

To understand the importance of what is being said here, we need to know the context in which it first appears—700 years before the birth of Jesus Christ. About 2,700 years ago there was trouble brewing in Jerusalem. In that time the kingdom known as Israel was divided in two: Israel and Judah. Ahaz was king of Judah, the Southern Kingdom. Resin, the king of Syria, and Pekah, the king of Israel, had united together against the Southern Kingdom. They invaded Judah and besieged Jerusalem. Ahaz has to make a choice. Will he trust in his own armies or trust in the Lord?

Enter the Prophet Isaiah. God tells Isaiah to go to King Ahaz, king of Judah, and tell him God has everything under control and he'll confirm that with a sign. Isaiah says, don't trust in a military alliance with Assyria, trust in the Lord. Ahaz doesn't want a sign from the Lord because Ahaz was an evil king who was weak and insecure, but God gives him a sign anyway. And in Isaiah 7:14 we read, **"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."** God was promising, through this prophecy, to be with the people of God. No one would destroy them or the royal line of David. Sure enough, history tells us that the northern kingdom, Israel, was destroyed, its population deported, and

Judah was overrun four times. But God ultimately preserved his people just as He promised.

God tells king Ahaz that the sign of this deliverance is a child that will be born. Most Old Testament prophecies have an immediate local fulfillment and then a grand future fulfillment. If you read through Isaiah 7 you will see that there was a child born in the royal house of Ahaz. A woman who was a virgin got married and did conceive a child and they named him Immanuel and he was a symbol of God's presence in those dark times.

Fast forward to the New Testament and another child is born. His name is Jesus, which means "the Lord is Salvation." His title is "Immanuel, God with us." So, 700 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, a prophecy is revealed. Like Isaiah's day, Israel was in bondage under Roman rule. And in this dark moment of history, God reminds his people that He is with them again. He is found in the birth of a child who would be born of a virgin, live among His people, and die for their sins. That very child Isaiah later names "Mighty God."

God With Us from Genesis to Revelation

God with us is one of the primary themes of the Bible. From the very beginning of time, God made a way to be with his people. After God created the universe and everything in it he was with Adam and Eve in the Garden; God and man living together in perfect fellowship. But man rebelled against God and rejected God's rule over him. So God removed him from his presence. But there was a promise, and the promise was that through a child, through the child of a woman, war would take place and that child would crush the serpent's head (Gen.3:15). The child would make war with Satan, and he would be victorious.

Throughout the rest of The Story, we see God's attempt, over and over again, to be with his people. After the Garden, God was with us through a special covenantal relationship. The Ten Commandments were given and the Old Testament sacrificial system was set up so that God could be with us. As Israel roamed around in the desert, God was with us in the Tabernacle, the portable tent of God. The very place where God would dwell among his people in the Holy of Holies. Throughout the dark period of time when there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in their own eyes, God was with us through the Judges and then later a dynasty of kings. Centuries later, God had Solomon build a mighty Temple, a place where heaven and earth intersected, a place where God could be with his people again.

All these things were a shadow of things to come, leading up to God himself, putting on flesh, and living among us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God with us. You want to know what God is like? Look no farther than Jesus. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus makes a deal with us that we can't refuse. He says, "Give me all of your sin. I'll give you all of my righteousness. And we'll call it even." Jesus came to our place. He took our place. And he invites us back to his place. After Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, he gave us the Holy Spirit, a permanent sign of His presence with us.

Today we can say with boldness, "Fear Not." Why? Because God is still with us. But, if that is true, why do we struggle so much with fear? I think it's because many of us don't live like God is really with us, right here, right now. If you truly believed God was with you right now, what would that do to your fears? If we actually lived like that Almighty God was with us now, I think our fears would turn into faith.

I was thinking about my own kids. Most of the time, they just want to be with me. If I go out to the store or run a quick errand, usually one of them just wants to come along. I'm learning that the greatest gift a parent can give a child is their presence. Kids crave their parents' presence, especially in this day and age. And you know what, that is why the Almighty One became Immanuel. God wants nothing more this Christmas than to be with you. God wants to spend eternity with you. So he came. One pastor said, "Immanuel, infinitely rich, became poor. He assumed our nature, entered our sin-polluted world, took our guilt on Himself although he was sinless, bore our griefs, carried our sorrows, was wounded with our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities. All of that is wrapped up in this phrase, 'God with us.'"

Revelation 21:3 points to a future time where our fears will all be erased, ***"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.'***"

Fear Not! Jesus came to our place. He took our place. And he invites us back to His place.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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