



Good morning and Merry Christmas everyone! Did you know that over four million babies are born in the United States every year? The most popular day for babies to make their entrance into the world is Tuesday. The next most popular day is Monday. Sunday is the slowest day, with 35 fewer births than average. The most “popular” month to be born is September. How many of you were born in September? You are a “new year’s resolution baby!” When we think about all the new babies and giving birth, it happens so often that we have to ask some fundamental questions: Why is this Child—the Child that we celebrate every Christmas—so special? I mean, four million babies enter the world in the United States in one year, and we’re celebrating one Child born over two thousand years ago, far away in the Middle East, to a peasant family. So what’s the big deal about this one? Why do people make such a fuss about one baby being born to a teenage girl?

What Child is This? To answer that question, I have to take you back about seven hundred years before his birth, to when the Christmas story in the Bible actually begins. So about two thousand seven hundred years ago, the Jewish Prophet Isaiah wrote these words:

Then Isaiah said, “Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel” (Is. 7:13–14).

What Child is This? Isaiah’s Prophecy Fulfilled

To understand the importance of what is being said here, we need to know the context in which it first appears. About 2,700 years ago there was trouble brewing in the city of Jerusalem. In that time the kingdom known as Israel was divided in two: Israel in the North and Judah in the South. A guy named Ahaz was king of Judah at the time. Unfortunately for him, Assyria was growing stronger and threatening smaller nations whose security depended on a very delicate political balance. Syria and Ephraim (the Northern Kingdom) tried to pressure Judah into an alliance against Assyria, but Ahaz refused to join them. That doesn’t make sense; why would he do that? Well, it’s because he secretly made a treaty with Assyria (2 Kings 16:5–9)! Syria and

Ephraim were ticked off that Ahaz wouldn’t join them so they planned to overthrow his kingdom instead. King Ahaz is terrified and has to make a choice; will he trust in his own armies and his alliance with Assyria or will he trust in the Lord?

Enter the Prophet Isaiah. God tells Isaiah to go to King Ahaz and tell him God has everything under control and he’ll confirm that promise with a sign. Isaiah says, don’t trust in a military alliance with Assyria, instead trust in the Lord. But, 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. In Isaiah 7:14b we read,

“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 forever. No army will ever destroy them completely and the royal line of David will go on. God tells king Ahaz that the sign of this deliverance is a child will be born.

You should know that most Old Testament prophecies have an immediate fulfillment and then a future fulfillment. If you read the book of Isaiah you will see 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. He was a symbol of God’s presence in those dark times. But sadly, just as Isaiah warned, the Northern Kingdom Israel was destroyed, its population deported, and Judah too was overrun. But, God ultimately preserved his people just as he promised. Fast forward to the New Testament and another child is born. We read the account in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 1:18–25).

What Child is This? Joseph’s Story

In Matthew’s account, the supernatural virgin birth is announced to a man named Joseph. Joseph is engaged to be married to a young teenage virgin named Mary. Now, in that time in history, engagements were much different. Today, if you’re engaged and something goes wrong, you just break off the engagement. Back then, an engagement was actually a binding agreement. A couple would be engaged for a year before their wedding day and if they wanted to break off the engagement, they actually had to file for a legal divorce. The only other way to get out of an engagement would be to die. And actually, the engagement

was so serious that if one of the two people died, the other one would be considered a widow or a widower.

Let's try and get into the minds of Joseph and Mary here. If you think about it, you have to admit it had to be a really hard conversation that day. I imagine Mary sitting down with her fiancée and saying, "Joey, honey, 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!" So, you have to admit 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 Joseph doesn't want to marry someone who's crazy or a liar. He must have thought, "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 big no-no, one punishable by death. They could stone you for that. What would he do?

Joseph came up with a plan to divorce her secretly. Divorcing her quietly was actually 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's hoping that maybe Mary can go have this baby somewhere else, and hopefully start over, and Joseph will start over, and they'll both move on with their lives. Joseph is about to learn one of the most important life lessons for those who want to honor God.

If you're taking notes, this is big. He's going to learn that pleasing God sometimes means disappointing people. He's going to learn the powerful truth that if you want to obey God, there will be times when other people will not agree and not understand. Pleasing God means obeying him even when it doesn't make sense from a human perspective.

Isn't the same true for us? 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 speaks to us. If you are a people pleaser, Joseph's story has something to say. 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. I'm sure he got wise counsel. I am sure he sought the Scriptures. But, even then, he's operating from fear not faith. So God was about to deal with his situation in a very unique way.

What Child is This? God's Plan Unfolding

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, "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 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."

Verse 21 is so powerful. 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 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 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 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 struggling with things, there are times when we want more information about what God is doing. Times where we say to God, "Give me some clarity God, then I won't be such a mess." But from God's view he's saying, "You can't handle the details. If I showed you everything, you'd be even more afraid and wouldn't even take the first step." The principle here is: 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 that outcome is God's responsibility and obedience is our responsibility. We see Joseph's obedience in verses 24-25, when he takes Mary as his wife. Faith says, I'm going to obey, even though my fears tell me to do something else. Faith says, I'm going to stay in a difficult situation, when everything inside wants me to run.

"God With Us" from Genesis to Revelation

Look with me at verses 22-23 again because that's where we see Isaiah's prophecy fulfilled.

"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")."

So, seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ, a prophecy is revealed during a fearful event. Like Isaiah's day,

Israel was in bondage under foreign rule, the Roman Empire to be specific. And in this dark fearful moment of history, God reminds his people that he is with them. God came in the birth of a Child who would be born of a virgin, who will live among his people and die for their sins. His name is Jesus, which means the Lord is Salvation. His title is Immanuel, God with us, that very Child Isaiah later names, "Mighty God" which we'll look at on Christmas Eve.

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 in the end he would be victorious.

Throughout the rest of God's 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 have a relationship with his people. As Israel roamed around in the desert, God was with his people 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 his people through the Judges and 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 events were a shadow of things to come, leading up to God himself, putting on flesh and living (tabernacling) among us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God with us. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus makes a deal with us that is often refused. 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. Died in 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 and the church as permanent signs of his presence with us. That means Jesus is here right now living in you, those who trust and follow him.

God is Still With Us

If I could summarize all the truths of Christmas in only three words, these would be the words: "God with us." But, if that is true, if God is still with us, why do we struggle so much? Why do we worry, stress, doubt and grovel in sin? I think part of the reason is many of us don't live like God is with us, right here, right now, always. If you and I truly believed God was with us right now, how would that help us with our problems?

As a father with three kids, it's really hard to spend quality, individual time with each one of them. So, if I run a quick errand or go somewhere, I usually ask one of them to come with me. Most of the time (not all the time), they are happy to just be with me. I'm learning that the greatest gift a parent can give a child is their presence. In our culture today, kids crave their parent's presence. And 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. And the promise of the Bible is if you draw near to God he will draw near to you. One pastor put it this way, "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.'"

Not only is Jesus here right now, the book of Revelation points to a future time where our problems and pain will be erased forever, ***"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'"*** (Rev. 21:3). Jesus is physically coming to this earth again. And on that day, he will make all things new.

On Christmas we celebrate God with us. Jesus came to earth not as a philosophy to be discussed, or a theory to be debated, or a concept to be pondered. Love came down. God became a person to be followed, enjoyed and loved. He came to be with you. The question is, will you be with him?

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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