

As most of you know, there's a lot of interest these days in discovering our roots. Maybe you've seen the commercials by ancestry.com with someone sharing a life-changing story of taking a DNA test and finding out they're not who they thought they were.

That can be a startling thing. I myself decided to take the test and find out once and for all where I came from. It's not that I didn't know anything. The extended family I grew up with on my mother's side were all Italians who'd come over from Lucca, Italy a little over a century ago. That much I knew—I'm an Italian.

But then the results came back and I discovered I wasn't who I thought I was. The test showed I'm only 16% Italian and among other things I'm 31% Irish. Not only did that shock me but it shocked my wife. I think she liked the idea of being married to an Italian, but not so much an Irishman! Thankfully, she got over it, but I'm not sure I have.

Where we come from matters. It matters to who we are and who we become. You go to a counselor and the first thing she'll do is try to dive into your past, where you came from, what kind of family you grew up in. Sometimes to move forward you have to go backward; you have to look at where you came from.

The same thing is true when we come to the story of Jesus. In Matthew's gospel, which we began last week, he starts by going backward, establishing where Jesus came from—his roots. Last week we looked at a genealogy which shows Jesus is the One promised long ago, a descendant of Abraham. The camera lens is wide in this genealogy. God promised Abraham long ago all the nations of the earth would be blessed through his family line. We read name after name showing Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise.

But then we come to verse 18 and the focus narrows to one single family and their story. It may not seem important on the surface but the story of this family will tell us a lot about who Jesus is, what he came to do, and what he calls us to do as well.

It started with what we call engagement. I've noticed how in recent years marriage proposals and engagements have become quite a spectacle. But in first century Palestine there were no cameras or Instagram. There were actually three steps a couple went through before they lived together as husband and wife.

Most marriages back then were arranged by the parents. So, first, the fathers of the two families would **engage** the couple

sometime during childhood. That engagement could be broken, say if the girl or boy decided this wasn't the right person for them.

The second stage was when the couple would become **betrothed**. The girl would be a teenager and the young man around twenty. The period of betrothal was about a year long, and during this time the couple was considered husband and wife, but they didn't live together or sleep together. But once that couple was betrothed there was no turning back. That commitment was binding and could only be broken by a legal divorce, and the only grounds for such a divorce would be unfaithfulness, which was considered adultery.

Then, of course, the third step was when the husband and his friends came to the woman's home and took her back to his home for the **wedding**. It was then the marriage would be consummated and the couple would live together as husband and wife.

During Her Betrothal, Mary is Found to be Pregnant

So you can understand the scandal behind the story of Jesus' birth. Matthew writes in verse 18:

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.

Mary and Joseph were in that year-long period of betrothal, and sometime during that period Mary was found to be pregnant. Matthew says it happened through the Holy Spirit, but no one else knew that. It's hard for us today to understand what a scandal this was. This was a shame-based culture, and this would bring shame on Mary's family, her town, and most of all Joseph. They were from a small town in the region of Galilee. Historians tell us Galilee was very conservative, like a small town in Mississippi. For example, in other parts of Palestine betrothed couples could spend time alone, but that was frowned upon in Galilee.

Joseph, Just and Merciful, Decides to Divorce Her Quietly

So, this was a scandal and a crushing blow to Joseph. He knew he hadn't touched her. Imagine what he's feeling. Walk a moment in his shoes. What do **you** feel? Confusion, humiliation, jealousy, anger. The OT law said Mary could be stoned for adultery, but that rarely happened in those days because Rome didn't allow it. One thing for sure, Joseph knew he couldn't go through with

the wedding. If he married her, everyone would assume he was the one who got her pregnant. He'd always live with that shame. But, still, he had a choice. He could divorce her in one of two ways. The normal way would be for him to make the reason for the divorce known to all and expose Mary to public humiliation. If he did that no man would ever marry her. I'm sure in his moments of anger this is what he wanted to do. Who could blame him? But there was another way. According to an obscure passage in the book of Numbers, he could choose to do it quietly with a simple document, two witnesses, and no reasons being made known. It wouldn't save Mary from the consequences of being an unwed mother, but the whole ordeal would be much easier on her.

Have you ever been torn between two opposing ideals, like justice and mercy? Micah 6:8 says, *"What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."* So justice and mercy must somehow be brought together. This is what Joseph was wrestling with. On the one hand, he wanted to be just; be faithful to the law of God. That was important to him. Righteousness and holiness matter. The standards of God's Word can't be compromised. On the other hand, what about mercy? What about compassion? It's like being on a teeter-totter. You can come down hard on either side, but the most difficult is to be suspended between the two. How do you balance justice and mercy?

With that in mind, we can better understand the next verse.

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. (v. 19)

Joseph found that middle road between justice and mercy. He'd divorce her, as the law required. He wouldn't compromise that, but he'd do it in the most merciful way allowed. He'd do it quietly, not exposing her to public disgrace.

A Messenger Appears to Joseph in a Dream

But God had another path, an even more difficult one. We don't know how much time went by, but while Joseph was still stewing over this, something totally out of the box happened.

But after he 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." (verses 20-21)

You might say Joseph was a dreamer, much like his namesake in the OT. In fact, this was the first of several dreams Joseph will have in these first chapters of Matthew. Dreams were often the means by which God communicated something important to his people, and this was no exception.

In this dream an angelic messenger tells Joseph to go and take Mary home as his wife. It's interesting how he says, "Don't be afraid" to do this. Why would he be afraid? Because he knew what people would think. We've already seen Joseph was a man of integrity, he was "faithful to the law," but this would forever mar his name. In essence he'd be saying, "I did it. This is on me."

The angel also exonerates Mary. She isn't an adulterous woman after all, but rather she's pregnant through the Holy Spirit. There's a kind of reverent modesty in this. We're not given details. We do know the Spirit was often the agent of God's activity, especially in creation and the giving of life. And here he miraculously brings a life into being in Mary's womb. It's hard to believe, for sure. It's not like Joseph heard this and thought, "Oh yeah, I should have known that. The Holy Spirit did it. That makes perfect sense." Sure, it sounds crazy, but if we believe in a God who created all things by the word of his mouth, why can't we believe this?

Finally, he tells Joseph to name him "Jesus." This is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua. It wasn't an unusual name back then. A lot of baby boys were named Jesus. It means "Yahweh (God) saves." It's a good name for a Jewish boy, but the angel adds something unique: **This Jesus** will do something no one else can do—save his people from their sins.

Matthew Says This All Took Place to Fulfill a Prophecy

Then Matthew, as he so often does in his gospel, shows how all of this fulfilled a 700-year-old prophecy from the Old Testament. Remember Matthew was written for a Jewish audience. So he says,

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"). (verses 22-23)

This prophecy comes from Isaiah 7:14. The Lord said through Isaiah a virgin would give birth to a son and he'd be called Immanuel, God with us. This is one of those prophecies that had an immediate fulfillment in Isaiah's day as a child was born to a young woman in Isaiah 8, but it also has a super-fulfillment here in the conception and birth of the Messiah. In fact, in chapter 9 Isaiah speaks of that One who was still to come: *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace"* (Is. 9:6). That One is truly Immanuel, God with us.

Joseph Woke Up and Did What the Angel Said

With that, Joseph woke up and he did what the angel told him to do.

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. (verses 24–25)

Joseph completes the betrothal period. He goes and gets Mary and takes her home. They have a wedding, but no wedding night until after the child was born.

The story closes with these words, *“And he gave him the name Jesus.”* These may be the most important words in the entire story. Why is that? It goes back to something the angel said to Joseph. Did you notice how he addressed Joseph? He said, “Joseph, son of David.” He reminds us this very ordinary man—this poor carpenter living in a podunk town—that he’s in the royal line of David. Everyone knew the Messiah had to come from that line, and the lineage was passed on not through the mother but the father. The Messiah would have to be a paternal son of David. But how can that happen when Joseph isn’t his real father?

Do you know what the answer is to that? Adoption. By taking Mary as his wife and by naming the child, Joseph officially adopted Jesus and bestowed on him the status of a descendant of David. I don’t know when Jesus discovered he’d been adopted by Joseph, but it doesn’t really matter. The point of this whole narrative is that through Joseph’s painful but willing obedience, Mary’s son became his own son and a legal heir to the House of David.

It made me think of my own mother. She never really knew her birth father. He exited her life when she was a small child. But then her mother remarried and the man she married adopted my mom and gave her his name. He was the only grandfather I ever knew. In fact, I didn’t even know he was my grandfather by adoption until I was thirteen. But just like my mother, when Jesus became the adopted son of Joseph, he got a new identity, in this case as a son of David.

God uses the extraordinary actions of ordinary people to bring salvation to a broken, sinful world. As I said, sometimes you have to go backwards in order to move forward. And the story of this family before Jesus was even born tells us a lot about who he is, what he came to do, and what he calls us to do as well.

Make no mistake, this story is first and foremost about Jesus. Right at the outset Matthew said, *“This is how the birth (origin) of Jesus the Messiah came about”* (v. 18a). He’s the Messiah, the Promised One, the King of not just Israel but of the whole world. Do you know him as your King? Are you surrendered to him? Do you give him the right to call the shots in your life?

But that’s not all. He’s also our Savior—Jesus. He didn’t come to save us from politicians or national oppression, like the Jews expected their Messiah to do, but rather from the ravages of sin. Do you know him as your Savior? Do you know you need saving? Your sin separates you from God. Your sin enslaves you. Your sin makes you a child of wrath. It’s not very good news. But to appreciate and embrace the good news about Jesus, you have to

know the bad news and confess your sin. If you won’t confess your sin then Jesus really has nothing to offer you.

But, still, that’s not all. He’s Immanuel, God with us. This is the biggest mind blower of all. Jesus is “God with us” as he wails in the manger’s straw, as he’s baptized by John in the wilderness, and as he takes the bread in his hands and says, “This is my body broken for you.” Jesus is God with us as he hangs from a Roman cross, gasps for breath, and cries out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

No other philosophy would dare say such a thing. The Greeks despised the idea God would take on a body and enter our world as a bloody baby. One Greek philosopher asked, “How could one admit God should become an embryo, that after his birth he’s put in swaddling clothes, that he’s soiled with blood and bile and worse things yet.”

In Islam the thinking is similar. Muslims appreciate Jesus as a prophet but they can’t accept that God would become a man, much less a baby; Allah forever dwells above us. He’s too holy and we’re too sinful for him to become one of us. But the uniqueness of the Christian faith is that this man Jesus is God with us.

He’s Messiah. He’s Savior. He’s Immanuel. The only thing that can explain that is love. *“For God so loved the world...”* Bono, the lead singer for U2, became a follower of Christ after attending a Christmas Eve service in Dublin, Ireland. With tears streaming down his face, he explained what happened: “The idea that God, if there is a force of love and logic in the universe, that it would seek to explain itself by becoming a child born of poverty in s--- and straw, a child, I just thought, ‘Wow!’ Just the poetry... I saw the genius of picking a particular point in time and deciding to turn on this... Love needs to find a form, intimacy needs to be whispered... Love has to become an action or something concrete. It would have to happen. There must be an incarnation. Love must be made flesh.”

But here’s something else really amazing to me: Joseph, this very ordinary blue-collar man, seemed to understand this love as well. I don’t know if Joseph fully grasped all he was entering into, but it was through his extraordinary actions that this Messiah, Savior and Immanuel was manifest to the world. Here’s what really blows me away: In the obedience of love, the same love Jesus would demonstrate on the cross, Joseph chose to stand in solidarity with Mary. He chose to stand in the stigma and shame of alleged sin. He could have had a Jerry Springer moment, exposing her to the whole world, but instead he stood with her. Joseph, this man of deep integrity of heart, this man committed to the highest standard of God’s law, chose to live the rest of his life being the subject of gossip and raised eyebrows.

This is what really gets me about this—Joseph embodied the obedient love of Jesus by standing in the stigma of sin even before Jesus started his ministry. He was **with** Mary, just as

God was with us. Joseph follows the way of Jesus, our Savior and Immanuel.

And I believe this says something to us. Bono is right. "Love needs to find a form, intimacy needs to be whispered... Love has to become an action or something concrete."

Love will move us into contemptible places where we stand in solidarity with sinners. Like Jesus, we'll move into places of pain, despair and darkness to embody the love of Jesus by our presence. Maybe it's at Street Church, or passing out bags of food in the Tenderloin, or leading a bible study in a convalescent home. I have a friend named Eddie Williams, a former NFL running back, who's starting a church in the Hunter's Point area of San Francisco; not an easy place to do ministry.

Recently, I learned about a ministry called Foster the Bay which is partnering with churches in the Bay Area to promote Foster Care. I learned over 7,000 children in the Bay Area have been removed from their homes often due to neglect or abuse. 70% of inmates in the California prison system spent time in the foster system. 60% of those rescued from human trafficking in the U.S spent time in the foster system. 30% of those who age out of the foster system will become homeless. They asked me, "What would the Bay Area look like ten years from now if every single child who entered the foster system was placed in a loving, stable, Christ-centered home?" They're asking for love that is more than an idea and has a form.

This past week one of our elders shared how he feels God might be calling him to travel to Mali, West Africa as part of our effort to share the gospel with an Unreached People Group called the

Moors. The Moors are a nomadic tribe who are all Muslim. The problem is they're in a part of West Africa that's very dangerous with strongholds of al Qaeda. The U.S. State Department basically says don't go; it's very dangerous. So we were trying to talk him out of going. And do you know what he said? He said, "But if no one goes, how will they ever hear about the love of Jesus?" Oh yeah. We couldn't answer that. You see, that's love that's more than idea; it's love that has a form.

But sometimes it's not quite so dramatic. For some of us, embodying this obedient love will mean we stay where we are—our homes, neighborhoods, schools, places of work, soccer teams, and just live as salt and light as Jesus told us to; to make love more than an idea, a concept; to make it concrete. Each of us must ask ourselves: Where's God calling me to this kind of obedient love? Where's God calling me to stand in solidarity with broken and sinful people? Where's God calling me to be willing, like Joseph and like his adopted son, to make love concrete, to stand in solidarity with sinners because that's why Jesus, our Messiah, our Savior and our Immanuel came?

Sometimes to move forward you have to go backward. Sometimes to know what you're called to do you have to look at where you came from. As we look back at the story of Jesus before he was even born, we learn he was Messiah, Savior and Immanuel, and we learn we're called like his adoptive father Joseph to stand with sinners, giving love a form.

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