

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 21, 2014

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 99, 98:1-2, 105, 96, 92.

Lessons: Isaiah 7:10-14, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:1-17.

Sermon Text: Matthew 1:18-25.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Matthew has begun his Gospel with the genealogy of Jesus Christ. That genealogy proves that Jesus Christ is a descendant of Abraham, fulfilling the promise God gave to Abraham that ***“all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”*** (Genesis 12:3)

Matthew uses 17 verses to assure us that Jesus, born of Mary, is a descendant of Abraham. He uses one verse here to assure us that this child is truly the Son of God, ***“conceived by the Holy Spirit”***. Today please listen as Saint Matthew tells us about

THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST

- 1. Although Joseph is troubled by the situation, an angel reassures him.**
- 2. Jesus is the one who will “save his people from their sins.”**

Matthew describes the birth of Jesus very simply. No baby showers. No gift registries. No fancy birth announcements except what God tells us, including in Luke 2, the Christmas history that we and our children will remember when we celebrate Christmas. No fancy nursery room to bring the baby home to. No elaborate changes of clothing for the new baby. No complete layette.

Yes, a simple story, but one with a complex history behind it. It started when mankind first sinned and God assures Satan ***“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”*** (Genesis 3:15) For about four thousand years God kept reminding mankind that he would send a Savior from sin, giving hints in prophecies, both subtle and striking, throughout the Old Testament.

The Word of God states a fact without even attempting to explain how it took place. God tells us more in the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel. It reports a birth that was unique in all of human history. This tells us that the eternal Son of God, who ***“was with God in the beginning”*** and through whom ***“all things were made”*** (John 1:2, 3) assumed human flesh and blood in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He is true God from eternity, and he is also true man since he was conceived in and born of a human mother a little more than 2,000 years ago.

It was in this way that the Messiah assumed human nature and took upon himself the form of our sinful flesh. As the Son of God he had no beginning, but is in the bosom of the Father from eternity. As a human being he had a beginning, and Matthew tells us by inspiration of the Holy Spirit: ***“His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.”*** That pledge was more than what we commonly call engagement. It is possible that they had even spoken vows of marriage in the presence of witnesses, and they were regarded as husband and wife. According to the custom of the time, the marriage celebration would follow some months later and only then would the bride and groom begin their life living together as husband and wife.

Mary had entered into a contract of betrothal with Joseph. She had agreed to a marriage, she had pledged her word to Joseph, just as he was bound to her by his promise of betrothal. While Mary was in this relationship

to Joseph, and after she had given him her pledge as his promised bride, she still lived at her own or at her father's house. As a rule, some time elapsed before a betrothed virgin was formally given in marriage and taken to her husband's house. During this time, they did not live together as husband and wife, though the marriage contract was legal and binding. And it was at this time, before the celebration, that Mary was found to be with child. Her situation was not only delicate, but the most distressing and humiliating which could fall to the lot of a pure maiden. Knowing herself to be innocent of even the slightest transgression in deed, and fully convinced of the fact that her condition was due only to the supernatural working of the Holy Ghost, she nevertheless could not expect anyone to believe her defense, if she should attempt one. Nothing but her faith and confidence in God could have supported her in such circumstances, where her reputation, her honor, and her future life were at stake.

When Joseph became aware of Mary's pregnancy, he could only conclude that she had been unfaithful to him. If that was true, he would not take her home as his wife after all. We can only imagine the pain and disappointment Joseph felt. Matthew tells us only what Joseph did. He was a righteous man. He was righteous in God's sight through his humble faith in God's promise of the Savior to come, and so he was concerned about living a righteous life. Joseph probably knew of the Isaiah promise that *"the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel"* (Isaiah 7:14) but could only marvel that he was now personally involved in the fulfillment of that promise. This is the way the Savior should come into the world. And so he did not seek revenge or wish to *"expose her to public disgrace."* Instead, he *"had in mind to divorce her quietly."* He did not choose strict measures, but rather considered a quiet cancellation of the bond of betrothal, without assigning a cause, in order that her life might be saved.

But the Lord intervened. *"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.'"* He sent an angel to Joseph in a dream. Joseph did not just dream about an angel bringing him a message. A real angel came to him and spoke to him. He told Joseph, *"What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."* Mary would give birth to a son, and Joseph as legal father was to name the child Jesus.

The appearance of an angel in a dream was one of the methods which God used to make known his will, or to reveal the future in special cases. The angel addresses Joseph as *"a son of David"* to emphasize the thought of the legal acknowledgment of the child. He should not be afraid to publicly accept Mary as his wife. This was an act of faith, to believe the Lord absolutely, in spite of all the evidences of the senses. This public recognition would save the honor of Mary and also that of her child. For instead of being the fruit of some adulterous action, the child which was to be born of her was of the Holy Ghost, begotten by deliberate intervention of God, contrary to the course of nature.

The angel went on: *"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."*

Jesus was a common name among the Jews. It was the same as the Old Testament Hebrew name Joshua. The name Jesus means "God saves," or "Jehovah saves." When this name was given to an ordinary child, it could be a reminder of God's promise of a Savior. In Christ's case, it identified the one and only Savior of the world. Jesus' name tells who he is – God – and what he does – saves.

The Jewish people, in general, at that time were looking for a different kind of Savior than God was sending. They wanted a Messiah who would save them from the oppression of the Romans and reestablish a kingdom like that of David and Solomon. But the angel promised the same kind of Savior as the Old Testament prophets had foretold, one who would save his people from their sins. And, of course, we know from Scripture that *"his people"* was not only the earthly nation of Israel but included people from every race and nation on earth.

Many of the Jews wanted only an earthly Messiah who would provide them with security and material gifts for this life, and some of the Jews even attempted to force Jesus to be that kind of king, as John writes on one occasion: *"Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself."* (John 6:15)

In a similar way, there are "theologians" today who look to Christ only for liberation from poverty and oppression and not from the frightful, eternal consequences of sin. There are churches that regard their mission as making this world a better place and pay little attention to the perfect, abundant life that can be ours eternally for Jesus' sake. For example, Pope Francis is urging world leaders to fight poverty, ([Time](#), 12/23/2013) but speaking about the sin of homosexuality, he has said "who am I to judge?" ([Time](#), 7/29/2013) As Christians, we want to make Christ's kingdom and his righteousness our highest priority, being confident that he will provide us with the material things we need.

Because Matthew was writing primarily to Jews, who were familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures and were looking forward to the fulfillment of the promises of the Lord's prophets, he pointed out that the birth of Jesus was taking place exactly as the Lord had promised through the prophet Isaiah. ***"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' – which means, 'God with us.'"***

This message of the angel removed Joseph's doubts about Mary's faithfulness to God's marriage vows. To replace those doubts, Joseph received the amazing good news that he would have the privilege of caring for God's Son, the promised Messiah, the Redeemer of the world!

The virgin birth of Christ is clearly taught in the Bible, and it is an article of faith that is confessed by the whole Christian church on earth in the Apostles' Creed: "And [I believe] in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary." Martin Luther's explanation of the Second Article declares that "Jesus Christ, true God begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord."

Yet many claim that Jesus, the son of Mary and Son of God is a mere human and believe and teach similar heresies. But with the prophecy from Isaiah and the fulfillment from Matthew and Luke we find that Jesus Christ is really true God and true man, born of the Virgin Mary. For us that is not merely a ceremonial statement on Sunday, but a sincere confession of 'this we believe', 'this is most certainly true.'

Some language scholars argue that the Hebrew word translated "virgin" in Isaiah could mean just "young woman". But the New Testament Greek word plainly, unmistakably means "virgin", one who has not known a man (Luke 1:34).

Joseph believed the angel and obeyed his commands. He ***"took Mary home as his wife"*** without delay, but he had no sexual relations with her before Jesus was born. Jesus was Mary's ***"firstborn"*** (Luke 2:7), but this does not indicate whether or not additional children were born to Mary and Joseph. The pious opinion that Mary remained a virgin all her life cannot be proven from Scripture, nor can the opposite. If we prefer to believe that Mary and Joseph had subsequent children, this does not diminish the honor that Mary deserves from us. It rather reminds us that marriage is a special blessing from God, and Mary and Joseph honored marriage by enjoying all its blessings.

By giving the child his name, Joseph would publicly and formally recognize him as his legal son. Jesus is to be the child's name. This is an expression of the very essence of the Son of God and Son of Man, through whom the salvation of men would be gained. The angel explains the name: he shall save his people from their sins. That is the goal of his coming; that is his mission. He alone saves. He brings full pardon, free salvation, complete deliverance, not only from the power of sin but also from the guilt of sin. Jesus brings all this to all who are in need of a Savior. This is the Gospel-message, not that Jesus makes allowances for sin, but that he has made atonement for it; not that he tolerates sin, but that he destroys it.

"When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus." He took Mary home as his wife, following Jewish customs.

So what do we do with this message, this good news? We can only marvel again at God's love in sending a Savior into the world. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for coming to save us! Amen.