

Fourth Sunday in Advent – December 22, 2019

Matthew 1:18-25

18 This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: 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. 19 Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20 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. 21 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.” 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.” 24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

By now most people have their travel plans made for Christmas. Some will be traveling to see family this week. Others will have family traveling to see them. Some will wait until New Year’s week to do their traveling. Some will just travel to go on vacation and get away for a few days or go somewhere warmer. But no matter what plans you have, there is one thing that can change everything this time of the year – the weather. Snowstorms can delay or cancel plans. Icy roads can make driving treacherous. Bitter cold can keep people from leaving their homes. It can certainly be disappointing to have to change one’s travel plans, but winter weather cannot always be anticipated or stopped. In our text for this morning Joseph received news that for him changed everything. The angel told him that Isaiah’s prophecy was coming true. We will take the news that the angel brought and apply it to ourselves as we see that **Immanuel Changes Everything**.

Verse 18 simply summarizes the situation that Joseph found himself in: “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: 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.” This was supposed to be a happy time in Joseph’s life—he was pledged to be married. This pledging had more legal standing than our practice of engagement today. It was a stronger union—Mary and Joseph were known by everyone as husband and wife, and after a period of time, typically a year, they would finally be able to live together as husband and wife. To end such a relationship would require a divorce.

But in the midst of his seemingly happy plans, there was a complication—Mary was pregnant. Joseph knew it was not his child; they were not yet living together as husband and wife. Suddenly their future was not looking so bright. Verse 19 states the course of action Joseph decided to take: “Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.” The Old Testament laws were clear. In Deuteronomy 22, a woman in this situation who was found to be unfaithful was to be put to death. Whether or not this was still the legal practice at this time, Joseph did not want Mary to face any public shame and so he decided to divorce her quietly.

But his plans would soon change again. Verse 20: “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.’”

Imagine Joseph's relief. Mary had not been unfaithful to him. They could continue with their wedding plans. The role of the Holy Spirit was undoubtedly puzzling to him and the angel followed up with a further explanation in verse 21: "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." This would be no ordinary child. The name Jesus, like Joshua, meant "The Lord Saves." This child would be the long promised Messiah who would save the world from sin.

The news of the virgin birth of Immanuel changed everything for Joseph. No longer would he have to divorce Mary, they could go ahead with their plans. And they would have a son. For every parent who has felt overwhelmed with the responsibility of raising a child, imagine being entrusted with the Son of God! With everything that had changed, Joseph did not need to take some time to consider his options or think about what was best for him. Verse 24: "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife."

Of course the virgin birth of Immanuel did not just change everything for Joseph and Mary. Imagine the changes for their fellow Jews. The promise of a Savior had been repeated for thousands of years. Prophecy after prophecy foretold of his coming—even prophecies like the one that Isaiah gave to King Ahaz in our first lesson (Isa 7). Ahaz was one of the wicked kings of Judah, he was not a believer. But even he received one of these prophecies, because of how important it was. Now that Immanuel was arriving, this would change everything for the Jews. All the laws of the Old Testament would no longer apply. Jesus had come to fulfill them and obey them, doing what the Jews could never do perfectly. Temple worship would be over. Sacrifices would no longer need to be made. For those Jews who had faithfully followed what the Lord had commanded, Immanuel meant release from the Old Covenant and entrance into the New Covenant, which was based on Jesus saving them from their sins.

What does Immanuel mean for our world today? Consider people who live without God in their lives. It comes down to not having any hope. They may fill up their lives with all kinds of things: work, family, money, activities, vacations. But all those things come to an end at some point and when they do they are left with nothing—no hope for the future, no hope for anything after this life. Consider the life of a sinner. There are consequences to our sinful actions. Perhaps it is in our relationships; perhaps it is in our health. We may be able to control our words and actions at times, but not all the time. We cannot even control our thoughts which enter into our minds whether we want them to or not. Our consciences bother us, we feel guilt and shame for what we do. Finally, consider the life of anyone who lives in this world that has been corrupted by sin. There is sickness and illness. There is pain and suffering. There is sadness and grief. There are broken homes and broken relationships and broken lives and broken hearts.

But Immanuel changes everything. Immanuel means God with us. God became man so that he could live and die to pay for sin and win heaven for all people. God with us means that we are not alone. For the hopeless, Immanuel brings hope. Not a hope that everything will always go well every single day as we live out our lives. But the sure hope of an eternal life after death that cannot be taken away. Because heaven is ours it changes our perspective on how we live our day to day lives. We do not simply fill up our lives with all the things of this world just to stay busy. But we pick and choose, we prioritize spiritual things over earthly things by making God number one in our lives. For the sinner, Immanuel brings forgiveness. Our guilt and shame are taken away. There is no fear of punishment. Yes, we will still sin on a daily basis, but God is with us. He will give us the strength to try again the next day, the strength to

live better lives. He will also give us the strength to offer that same forgiveness to others, something that is needed to make any of our relationships function in our lives. For the sufferer, Immanuel brings peace. There will always be the effects of sin on this world that make living here difficult. Sickness, suffering, and sadness will come at various times and in various ways. But having God with us means that we are at peace because such things are not obstacles that ruin our lives, but mere bumps on the road to our eternity in heaven. Only Immanuel has the power to make such changes in our lives.

The forecast for Christmas Day at this point looks cloudy with a high of 32 and a 30% chance of snow. We will have to see whether or not that changes people's travel plans this week. When it comes to the news of the birth of Immanuel—that does change everything. For Joseph it meant that he could continue his marriage plans and look forward to taking care of a son, who would also be his Savior. For the Jews it meant that the Old Testament prophecies were finally being fulfilled and the Old Covenant would soon be completed. For us today Immanuel changes our perspective on sin and death and suffering. We have forgiveness and hope and peace because our God is with us every step of the way. As we come together again this week to celebrate Christmas, we will see that the baby born in Bethlehem, our Immanuel, changes everything in our lives. Amen.