

Matthew 1:18-25 *"18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ^[a] took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed^[b] to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 23 "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel"(which means, God with us). 24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.*

Last week, we kicked off a new series entitled *The Shift*, where we are exploring how to shift our lives to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God. To help us this shift, during the Advent season—and to prepare us for where we'll be heading in the weeks to come—we began, last week, with the statement that *the King has come*. This is exactly what we celebrate during this season leading up to Christmas: the arrival of the King. However, as we noted in the first message of this series, the arrival of our King began with what, from a worldly perspective, might have been seen as an unwanted teen pregnancy.

At least, that's how it would have appeared to those living at the time. Consider how different this is from today's world. Many young married couples are delaying parenthood because of societal pressures, such as the pursuit of career goals and the desire for a carefully planned family life. As a result, many women do not have children until much later, or sometimes not at all. Last week, we were reminded that Mary would likely have been between the ages of 12 and 14 when she gave birth to Jesus.

Furthermore, when families today decide to have a child, they often create an elaborate birth plan, complete with specific requests. Parents-to-be search for the best doctors, hire doulas or midwives, and sometimes play classical music during labor to ensure their child enters the world in a peaceful environment. A great deal of research and preparation goes into planning the arrival of a baby. As a father of four, I can appreciate much of this careful planning; however, I want to ensure that our modern expectations of childbirth do not diminish our understanding of the tragic circumstances surrounding Jesus's birth.

Not only would Jesus' birth have been considered an unwanted teen pregnancy—bringing shame to both Mary and Joseph's families—but whatever plans Mary might have had were further disrupted when they received news that they needed to travel to Joseph's hometown for a census. Bethlehem was about 90 miles from Nazareth, and the journey, likely made on foot, could've taken up to a week. This meant it was highly likely that Mary would have to deliver her child in an unfamiliar area, far from home. Sure enough, upon arriving at Bethlehem Mary did in fact deliver her child, but since it took them so long to get to Bethlehem and there were so many individuals traveling to participate in the census there was no room for them, leaving Mary no other options, but to deliver her child in what modern equivalent to a barn. To make matters worse, shortly after Jesus' birth, the young couple was told they couldn't return home because of a bounty that was placed on their child. So instead, they fled to Egypt to escape King Herod, who was seeking to kill their precious baby.

As a result, Jesus' entrance into the world was marked by tragedy. His arrival triggered the massacre of all boys under the age of two in the Bethlehem region. It's against this backdrop, we are reminded of the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the arrival of our King—and the profound meaning of His coming into our broken world.

Perhaps this stigma even followed Jesus as a young child, with other mothers refusing to let their children play with him. One can imagine Mary watching on with a broken heart. At the very least, we know this stigma followed Him into adulthood, as scripture reveals details about His life. At one point, after His ministry had begun, Jesus Himself remarked, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household." This statement points to the rejection He faced.(Matthew 13:57)

After Herod died and Joseph and Mary determined it was safe to return home, they settled in Nazareth. Interestingly, the name Nazareth means "branch." Quite literally, Jesus came from the sticks—a somewhat joking observation, but one that underscores a deeper truth. Our Savior and King, the God-child, grew up in a small, insignificant town. When He finally returned home, it was to a place many dismissed. One prophet even asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

Scripture paints a striking portrait of Jesus: "He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces, He was despised, and we esteemed Him not." (Isaiah 53:2-3). When people saw Jesus approaching, they turned their faces away, as though they hadn't seen Him hoping he didn't notice.

Could I push my point a little further? Perhaps, to some, Jesus was an embarrassment. Suffice it to say, he wasn't King material.

As tragic as Jesus' birth and life may seem, perhaps there is another perspective—one that reveals a beauty even greater than the pain. If we're honest with ourselves, what I am about to explain is the kind of viewpoint we don't typically have the capacity to embrace or even categorize. Yet, consider this with me: while Jesus' arrival might not have aligned with Mary or Joseph's plans, and while the circumstances may seem as though God were distant, He knew exactly what He was doing. I am convinced that this is precisely what Matthew seeks to convey in his Gospel account. In fact revealing that indeed the King has come. Allow me to explain.

If we start with the virgin birth that Pastor Tim highlighted last week, we need to understand that it is both theologically critical to our faith and incredibly practical or meaningful to each of us. It's critical because, without Jesus being born of a virgin, He would have inherited the sin nature common to all humanity, making it impossible for Him to establish a new covenant as the second Adam. Additionally, being born of a virgin, Jesus was uniquely conceived by the Holy Spirit, allowing the fullness of God to dwell bodily in Him, as both fully God and fully man.

From the beginning, God declared to Eve that her offspring would reverse the curse of Genesis 3, promising that her seed would crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). Mary's role in this redemptive plan was not a diminishment of her role as a woman but rather the ultimate fulfillment of what it means to be a woman. Scripture tells us that Mary found favor in God's eyes and, when the angel announced God's plan to her, she responded in faith: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

Far from being an unwilling participant who might have protested with, "My body, my choice," Mary willingly submitted to God's plan. Her faith, courage, and unique place in bringing the promised Messiah into the world highlight her significance in the fulfillment of God's promise. Joseph also responded in obedience—though only after an angel appeared to him and explained the situation. Nevertheless, both Mary and Joseph were willing and godly individuals who stand as enduring examples of faith for us today.

Again considering that from the world's perspective, Mary's pregnancy might have been viewed as unplanned or unwanted. Mary knew what she was signing up for and what she would have to endure, which is why I love what it says of Mary in Luke 2:19, "Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart."

Regarding the flight from Bethlehem, what seems like an insignificant detour, it actually signifies Israel's escape from Pharaoh, and God calling Joseph to return from Egypt to Nazareth parallels Israel's exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land. Even the tragic genocide of Israelite babies under Herod mirrors Pharaoh's order to wipe out the male

infants in Moses' time. You see from the beginning, the enemy has been attempting to thwart the coming of the King long before Jesus' arrival, as Matthew's account vividly illustrates.

Then if we take Matthew's words when he says the prophets foretold that Jesus would be called a Nazarene, a historically astute person might quickly point out that no Old Testament scripture explicitly contains this prophecy. Additionally, Nazareth as a town didn't exist until about 150 years before Jesus' birth. What Matthew is likely referring to is not the location itself as much of the meaning behind the name Nazareth or Nazarene. While I may have jokingly referred to it as "the sticks," the name Nazareth actually means "branch."

When Matthew references the prophets, he is drawing on the broader symbolism of the word Nazareth/Nazarene and connecting it to the person of Jesus. For instance, Isaiah 11:1 states, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit." Jesus is that shoot—a symbol of new life and hope, springing forth from what seemed to be a lifeless and forgotten place. From the most obscure of locations, at a time when all hope seemed lost and the flame of expectation was nearly extinguished, the King has come.

This—everything we've been discussing about what it means that Jesus descended—is not just about Him leaving heaven, coming to our world, and dying for us. It's about how He lived His entire life in obscurity. From the world's perspective, His life might have seemed like a tragedy. If He had not truly been the Christ, His life would have appeared to be a complete waste. But because He descended, He also ascended, and God gave Him the name above every name: Yahweh. You and I worship Him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Consider what this means for us on two fronts. First, think about the life Jesus willingly subjected Himself to for our sin. He came into the world He created, and His own people did not receive Him. He exposed Himself to the worst aspects of humanity. He endured the mess we created, living in a broken world that He had once made perfect—not because He deserved such treatment, but because the world is dark and we are cruel. The Savior of the world found no room in the very world He came to save. Since Jesus has come, has He found a place in your life?

Secondly, some of us here today might feel as though we are living in captivity. Perhaps you don't feel welcome, even among your own family. Maybe life seems like a series of unfortunate events. Perhaps you've made a mess of your relationships, or you feel alone, even in a room full of people. Whatever you're feeling, you might be walking through a season that seems far different from what you expected, leaving you feeling like your life is being wasted and that purpose has eluded you. I want to introduce—or

remind—you of your Savior, who left heaven to be born into a world that did not receive Him. If only you would receive Him into your life, you would discover that your life is not a tragedy at all. Instead, every circumstance surrounding your life is meant to bring you to a place of faith and belief in Him.

Truly, like his name implies, Immanuel, God is with us, the king has come.