

Deep Down to Humanity

Matthew 1:18-25

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Indeed, how could it be? The story that we read of this morning, of the foretelling of the birth of Christ to his adoptive father Joseph—it shatters our logic. It confronts our reason, and when we let it, really let it, we will see both how scandalous it really is and how wonderful it is that God in his infinite wisdom would send his Son to come deep down to humanity. Let's look together in Matthew chapter one, verses eighteen through twenty-five.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"

(which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me this morning?

Lord, now, by the power of your Holy Spirit together with your eternal Word, I pray that you would open our hearts to wonder, to rejoice in, and to receive the reality that Jesus Christ the Son of the Living God became the God-man deep down to our humanity, to rescue us from our sin and to make us your precious people. Lord, give us hearts to believe and wonder and shatter our imagination for your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I ran across this piece of writing from one of my favorite authors. I first found out about her through National Public Radio. She is a fabulous writer, committed Christian now in the Orthodox Christian tradition. In fact, she and her husband minister here in the Baltimore region. She wrote these words. Her name is Fredericka Mathewes-Green. In reflecting on advent and the Christian story of incarnation, she had this reflection. She says:

The whole Christian story is strange. Frederick Buechner describes the Incarnation as "a kind of vast joke whereby the creator of the ends of the earth comes among us in diapers." He concludes, "Until we too have taken the idea of the God-man seriously enough to be scandalized by it, we have not taken it as seriously as it demands to be taken.

Mathewes-Green then concludes in this way:

A God-filled baby in a pile of straw was a pleasant image, but somewhat theoretical compared with the heart-stopping exhilaration of a visit from Santa Claus. The way a thunderstorm ripped the night sky, the hurtling power of the automobile Daddy drove so bravely, the rapture of ice cream—how could the distant Incarnation compete with those?

We grew up with the Jesus story, until we outgrew it. The last day we walked out of Sunday School may be the last day we seriously engaged this faith.

Here, I speak to the adults in the room. Have we left the story of the incarnation to our children's ministry, and left it on the toy shelf of forgotten stories until we come around to December? It is indeed precisely what C.S. Lewis called it: the greatest miracle. And what this passage does in telling us the story of God, the dream, and an angel speaking to Joseph, is it is meant to shatter our logic—to challenge us in all of our adult uprightness and call us to be a child again with childlike wonder. Just imagine for these next few moments that God became man. What does that say about God? What does it say for us? That God would come deep down to humanity? As we see this passage, I want you to see three things: fear, wonder, and God descending. Fear, wonder, and God descending.

First, I want you to see the fear again, if you didn't catch it in the passage. The first part of this passage is in fact dripping with fear. Very understandable, human fear. The first way we see it is in Joseph's dilemma. Look at Joseph's dilemma. It tells us he was engaged to be married, and the passage tells us in verse nineteen—and if perhaps you don't read this very often, or if perhaps you don't read the Bible very often, I want to tell you that every word here is meant to be here and not by chance. Notice what it says in verse nineteen: "and her husband Joseph, being just a man"—he's just a man. He's just a carpenter. And now the woman to whom he is betrothed is now pregnant.

I think all of us as adults in this room can just taste a little bit of the fear and uncertainty that might have crept into Joseph's mind. Can you imagine the anxiety? Ready to be married, planning for it, and then you hear your now-fiancée say to you, "I'm pregnant." Even today, in 2014, men in women in this room, I know you may have experienced this—because many in our world do. You know whether you are married or engaged or single, and you find yourself in an unplanned pregnancy—who of us cannot begin to imagine and taste what that fear might be like?

What I want to tell you is, it is a beautiful thing that that passage is here for us and that that detail is there. Why? Because it tells us something about what God is up to. God is up to this: He didn't come deep down to humanity that was all planned out, sitting in a palace, with the red carpet rolled out. No, God came to a young couple not yet married who were not living in a palace and surrounded by plush pillows. He came to two people who were planning to get married and now everything goes sideways—because he recognized that if it would be hard for us, if we think about it in 2014, imagine it in his day. He knew precisely what that would mean for Mary. She would be dismissed, cast off. He knew it would be scandalous for her, and the passage tells us "to protect her from shame." He wanted to protect her. Their life—surely, we're not the ones who think about future life—you can guarantee they were a couple wondering: "What will life be like when we're married? Will we have enough to provide for ourselves? What will your job as a carpenter be able to bring in for us?" They were not a cash-economy. They had to trade, and he would trade work for goods. What would that mean for us? Joy and anticipation now has been invaded with anxiety and uncertainty.

Joseph had a dilemma. But that is precisely what we are to see, because it is in that anxiety and in that fear in Joseph's dilemma that God intervenes. How does he intervene? The passage tells us there. He intervenes by this—verse twenty: "The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear.'" How beautiful it is, and what kind of God He is, that He comes to this couple, chooses them to be the vessels through which his Son would come into the world. He sees their fear, He sees Joseph's fear, and He comes to him. And what does He do? God intervenes in a very Biblical and very old way.

What does he do? First, He calls him by name. But notice what he does—"Joseph, son of David." That is not there by chance. If you've ever read the first chapter of Matthew, you'll know that this is preceded by genealogy, the genealogy of Christ. When God speaks to Joseph, he's saying to Joseph, "I'm calling you by name, but I'm connecting you to somebody else in your genealogy, and that somebody else

is none other than King David.” What He’s doing is He’s calling him by name and connecting him to the covenant—to God’s promises. That God intervenes in Joseph’s life in the midst of his fear, calls on him by name, and says, “You are a part of my covenant.” Think about that. Joseph’s name. Joseph would have known the history of his namesake. His history and his namesake comes from Joseph, one of his great forefathers, which would then stretch all the way back to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, down to Joseph. And what did God do with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph? He came to them and He said, “I am your God, and you will be my people. Do not be afraid.” He said it to Abraham, He said it to his children and his children’s children. Over and over again, God does this. He calls on a people by name, and He calls them and He gives them a name, and He says, “I will be your God”—and usually, right there, close by, he says those beautiful words: “Do not fear.” How beautiful is that, that God would so design it this way?

And more than that, what is He doing? He tells him: “Do not be afraid. You’re going to give him a name.” I’m going to get to this in just a moment, but let’s build the pre-history. “Give him the name Jesus.” That word “Jesus” in Greek is the same word in Hebrew as Joshua, which literally means “the Lord saves.” Now why is this important? It’s important because of what I’ve just told you. When He says, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear,” it’s an old pattern. It’s an old pattern that is to also be to you as you and if you call on the name of the Lord Jesus as Savior.

Here’s what it is, going all the way back to the Book of Joshua. This is what we hear in the Book of Joshua. In the opening pages He looks to Joshua and He says, “Joshua, son of Nun, you were an aid to Moses, and I am calling you to lead my people into the promised land.” And here’s what He tells him—He says: “I’m calling you to lead my people into the promised land, and I will be with you.” And then in a few short verses He tells him, “Be strong and courageous.” And then by verse eight, He says, “Be strong and very courageous.” But then He ends it with this: “For I, the Lord, will be with you forever.” The Lord says in the midst of our fear—He calls us by name, He connects us to His covenant promise, and He says, “Do not be afraid, for lo, I am with you.”

How beautiful it is that this pattern is given to people who are not of means, who are not of great stature. What does he say to Israel? “I chose Israel not because they were great among the nations but because you were no one among the nations.” He called Abraham not because he was a great king; because he was just one man. The same with Joshua, the same with Isaiah as we heard earlier. Isaiah said, “Who am I?” The Lord said, “But I call you,” and he touched Isaiah’s lips. He would do the same with David, and over and over again until we get to this point where he looks at Joseph—just a man, just a carpenter—and He says, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid.”

Do you know, he does that to you this morning. There are many of you this morning who know either the white noise of anxiety that seems to always hang in the air in your life. Perhaps you have the fear and anxiety of a future decision or an event, either in your own personal life or in someone that you love. Or the next day holds not certainty but uncertainty. The Lord’s message to you is as it was to Joseph: “Come to me. I am with you. DO not be afraid.”

But He goes further. In meeting him in his fear, in meeting him in exactly who he was—just a man—He then ushers him into this beautiful promise that is to be for Joseph and for us a matter of wonder. Wonder. Look at what He says in verse twenty and twenty-one: “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. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” He invites Joseph into wonder by giving him the command: “Give him this name.” Give him a name.

Now, generally it would’ve been left to the paternal father to give the name to the son. Here, before the child is born, Jesus’ Heavenly Father says to Joseph: “You shall give him the name Joseph.” That name is important because—you’ve heard me say it earlier—it literally means “the Lord saves.” It comes from the Hebrew word “Joshua,” and as we look back at the story of what God did in the life of Joshua, what did the Lord do? The Lord promised to provide. The Lord promised His presence. The Lord promised victory.

The Lord promised His presence, and throughout the Book of Joshua over and over again we see that the Lord was true to His promise. He was promising that here in Joseph's life. He says, "You will give him this name."

So, how is it that God means for Joseph not to have fear? What does it say for you and I to not have to be drawn into fear and anxiety? Is it just a piece of advice? Is it positive thinking? No, the story is the same. The idea of God's presence with us is not meant to be theoretical. It is real. It is something to be known. Something to be experienced. And that is, that in fact, Jesus does save. So here, Joshua, in the Old Testament, his name was a shadow. Just as surely as this light casts a shadow on me and puts the shape of that shadow at the back wall. That shadow is in the shape of who I am. Joshua, Moses, Abraham, Noah, all of these people and those after them who spoke in the Lord's name were shadows. And the light was the light of the Lord. And the shadow that they cast, the light that was cast there for them in their lives of the Lord's promises, was leading to a greater presence, and that presence was Jesus.

Why do we know this? We know this because the Lord tells us this reality: this name is more than just "Jesus saves." It means that he will come into our midst to save us, to rescue us from sin—not bad behavior, not bad attitudes, not a bad day, but from sin and bondage to it. To rescue us from the very thing from which we cannot release ourselves, because it is our default setting. The Lord sends his Son to do this—to live in our midst, to take up residence, and as Paul Miller once said, "Love walked among us." And who did Jesus go to? Jesus went to the poor, the suffering, the fearful, even his own disciples over and over again—"Do not be afraid, for I am with you." This would be Jesus' refrain. And then he would go to the cross and he would die on that cross to save us from our sins. He means for us to know this was his plan all along—to rescue us.

Now, perhaps you don't feel like you need rescuing. I can't really help you if you don't think you need rescuing. I know I do. I was reminded of just how perilous our situation is when I finally got around this weekend to watching last year's best film, *Gravity*. If you haven't seen it I'm not going to give anything away, but something happened in the middle of that film that was so poignant, so beautiful, that I said, "Now *that* is a good illustration." So here we go. The story is Sandra Bullock and George Clooney are astronauts. Of course, yes. They're in a perilous situation. They are, as Walker Percy once wrote, they are "lost in the cosmos" because of a combination of disastrous events.

But finally in this part of the film, Sandra Bullock's character, Dr. Ryan Stone, is in a Chinese rescue pod that is her only lifeline at this point. She's sitting now in this pod and she's just gotten in there, she's taken off her helmet, and she's trying to hit the radio dials as best she can from her training, trying to figure out, "Can anyone hear me?" She's yelling into the speaker and she says, "This is Dr. Ryan Stone. Can anyone hear me? Can anyone hear me? Over." And there's nothing coming through just lots of weird sounds, when finally she hears a voice. It's a voice not in her language; it sounds as though it's in Chinese, because she's in the Chinese space capsule thingy—whatever they call it, sorry scientists—so she's yelling into it, and what she hears is a language she doesn't understand, but it sounds like he's singing. She tries to have dialogue with him. Here's what she says: "No one will mourn for me. No one will pray for my soul. Will you mourn for me? Will you pray for me?" She was at the end of her rope, and she was reflecting that this day, that day, would be her last day of life. She was brought to the end of herself.

Then she says something very interesting. This: "Will you pray for me? I mean, I'd pray for myself, but I've never prayed. Nobody ever taught me how." After she utters those words, with the sound of the man's voice singing comes the sound of a crying infant. A crying infant. And she sits back in the chair as if in the fetal position, and she weeps. And I said, "That's it." Our sin makes us lost in the cosmos, and no one ever taught us how to pray. We barely even know how to pray for ourselves. And don't we at our very core imagine who would exactly mourn for us? Who prays for me? Who is praying for you? Isn't it a beautiful thing that what we celebrate in this passage is that God sent to us the crying infant, the Son, who when he was an adult would look to those who would hear and he would say, "I will teach you how to pray." And he said:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

We were lost in the cosmos, but God sent a crying infant. God made man clothed in flesh who would be the man we finally needed, who would go to the cross on our behalf and accomplish for us forgiveness of sins. Jesus will say, “As the Lord of lords and the King of kings, I have saved my people from their sins.” God came deep down.

But it gets better. Beyond the wonder, he also tells us about God descending. He says: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet,” and then he quotes Isaiah: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel, which means God with us.” What Matthew is doing in telling us this story and recounting it to us is he’s connecting the dots. What is he connecting the dots to? He’s connecting it to that passage of Isaiah, chapter nine, where we hear these words:

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

This is itself a connection to two chapters earlier, when Isaiah chapter seven announces that a child be born to this virgin, and he will be called Emmanuel—God with us. This is the promise. This is the connecting of the dots. It was for Isaiah.

You see, Isaiah as a prophet had to do two things to be considered a faithful prophet of the Lord. In his prophecy, he had to give both a promise that could be fulfilled within the lifetime of his hearers, and generally there was also a further-out promise that would be fulfilled later. The one would establish the other. If you go back and read Deuteronomy eighteen, you’ll see the instructions to the prophets of the Lord. Isaiah, as he’s calling out to the Lord, he’s concerned because Judah is about to be invaded by two enemies from the north. And the Lord says to him, “But there will be a woman who will give birth to a son.” This is what he tells him in Isaiah chapter seven. And that son would be his wife’s son—his own son. And he gives him this name, and that name literally translated means “quick to plunder, swift to spoil.” And God would say in Isaiah eight that Isaiah’s son would be the one through whom God would provide victory for Judah over her enemies, and that in fact that son would be called “God with us.” Emmanuel. In Isaiah chapter eight. But then, by the time we get to Isaiah chapter nine, we see that the near-time fulfillment will be seen in Isaiah’s literal son, but then there’s this other son that’s going to come, and his name will be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. His reign will be forever. So clearly that’s not talking about any son of Isaiah’s; that’s talking about something far greater. And that in fact God’s plan to descend has been all along, and through the Book of Matthew we see him connecting those dots.

Why? Because you and I, in looking at the process of God coming down to our humanity, are meant to be a people who are radically confronted with this question: do we believe that this is what God has

done? Are we able to allow ourselves, our hearts, our minds, our lives, to be so confronted by allowing God's wisdom to absolutely confront our logic, that says no way that a virgin woman can receive conception by God? And then, that God would grow up to be one just like you and me and then die on a cross and on the third day be raised to life? What it requires is for us to allow this passage, this word, this advent, to come in and to confront our logic and to awaken our imagination. And what it's going to require is a whole new alphabet. What do I mean? I mean this. Preparing for this week, I was reminded of Doctor Suess's book. Perhaps some of you have read it. It's called *On Beyond Zebra*. Here's what he says:

Said Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell,
My very young friend who is learning to spell:
"The A is for Ape. And the B is for Bear.
The C is for Camel. The H is for Hare.
The M is for Mouse. And the R is for Rat.

I know all the twenty-six letters like that...
"...through to Z is for Zebra. I know them all well."
Said Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell.
"So now I know everything anyone knows
From beginning to end. From the start to the close.
Because Z is as far as the alphabet goes."

Then he almost fell flat on his face on the floor
When I picked up the chalk and drew one letter more!
A letter he never had dreamed of before!
And I said, "You can stop, if you want, with the Z
Because most people stop with the Z
But not me!"
"In the places I go there are things that I see
That I never could spell if I stopped with the Z.
I'm telling you this 'cause you're one of my friends.
My alphabet starts where your alphabet ends!"

So you see, there's no end to the things you might know
Depending on how far beyond Zebra you go.
The places I took him! I tried hard to tell
Young Conrad Cornelius o'Donald o'Dell
A few brand new wonderful words he might spell.
I led him around and I tried hard to show
There are beyond Z that most people don't know.
I took him past Zebra as far as I could,
And I think perhaps maybe I did him some good.

My friends, adults and children alike, in the story of the incarnation God takes us way past Z for Zebra. He takes us way beyond an alphabet that we think we know all things. But God, in the mystery, became man and made his dwelling among us, full of grace and truth. And He gave him a name that is above all names. The Lord of lords and the King of kings and the Prince of peace. Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God. Jesus. "For he will save my people from their sins." Do you believe? May God increase our alphabet, that we might trust in Him. Let's pray.

Lord, we come to you this morning and we ask: will you not expand our imagination? Confront our logic and our reason with a mystery that cannot be contained by an alphabet but could only be enfleshed

with human skin and blood running through his veins—the gift of your Son, the godhead made man, who became a servant to the point of death for the sake of our sins, that we might be rescued from our lostness. Now, Lord, by your Spirit and your eternal Word, will you explode our hearts with joy and remake our minds with the power and truth of this great, great truth? The greatest miracle: God came deep down to our humanity. In Jesus' name. Amen.