

Advent in Biblical Perspective
From No News to Good News
“Joseph: Vagabond or Pilgrim?”
Matthew 2

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December 24, 2022 • Christmas Eve Sermon – 7pm

We have been studying the nativity accounts and the life of Jesus. They are found in Matthew and Mark. I'd like to read some that we haven't studied in this Advent season. I'd like to start with the regal visitors (wise men) from the East who bring regal gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, knowing that Herod was going to destroy them if they returned to tell him where Jesus was born so the Lord sent them home another way to protect them. That only infuriated the attempts of Herod to destroy the Messiah all the more. Think through this as you hear these birth nativity accounts.

Matthew 2:13-23 says [13] *Now when they (wise men) had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”* [14] *And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt* [15] *and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”*

[16] *Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.* [17] *Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:*

[18] *“A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.”*

[19] *But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,* [20] *saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.”* [21] *And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.* [22] *But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee.* [23] *And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene.*

In our study of the birth narratives from Matthew and Luke, I've called it, no news, good news, after God's 400 years of silence and then God speaks forth, Good news. That's why the first four books of your New Testament, when that silence is broken, are called the Gospels. The Good News is that Christ has come to save us from our sins, but in the opening divine revelation from the throne of God leading up to the birth of Christ and surrounding the birth of Christ were angelic messengers from the throne of God giving direction. There were six angelic messages and we have studied four of them.

One was the message to Zechariah and Elizabeth that the closing prophecy of the Old Testament that God would send one before the coming of the Messiah was about to be fulfilled through their providentially miraculous birth, even though they were beyond the year of giving birth, that they were going to bring forth a child who would be the fulfillment of the One who comes in the spirit and power of Elijah. The angel Gabriel having given that message to Zechariah, sending it on to Elizabeth now comes to Bethlehem and delivers another message to

Mary that she is the appointed mother, though a virgin she would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit and bring forth the Messiah. She was told not to fear, but to embrace this calling of the Lord. Then as Joseph finds out about this and is determining what to do, an angel then comes to him. We don't know whether this Gabriel or not for this angel is nameless for us. The angel tells Joseph, 'Don't be afraid of your calling. You're the adopted father.' The Divine decree is that he would be the adopted father, this one of the line of David would now marry one of the line of David, and that's Mary. Joseph was told to keep her a virgin, protect his betrothed, and to bring forth with her this One who comes from the tribe of Judah and the line of David. The angel is also going to give a message on the night of Christ's birth to the shepherds and then joined by a host of angels.

We have just read two more angelic messages. After the destruction of the innocence, the angel told Joseph to take Mary and the child into Egypt. He is then instructed by the angel to come back and further warned her not to stay in the land of Judah. Now, as I've been doing all of the study and laying out the chronology of this for us this entire Advent season and thinking about Christmas Eve, I couldn't help but come back to these texts and as I look at the birth and childhood narratives in Matthew 1 and 2 and in Luke 1 and 2 about Jesus, I realized I had something in common with Jesus, and that is our daddy moved around a lot. So was Joseph, a vagabond, because of all this moving, being someone rootless and not ready to sit down roots? I remember that word vagabond because my mother used this word when she told my dad, "It is time for us to get back to Charlotte, North Carolina. I feel like a vagabond." I didn't know what a vagabond was, it just didn't sound good to me. So, is Joseph a vagabond or is he a pilgrim following the Word of God with confidence in the call of God and the power of God?

I was born in Charlotte but I was born into a family that came out of what's called the mill towns of Augusta, Georgia. My dad was the first one in my family to ever graduate from high school, and nobody in my family until my dad had ever owned a piece of real estate, much less an entire home. Nobody owned anything and my granddaddy moved a lot. That is kind of way it started out in my life. When I was four years old we left Charlotte and moved to Kannapolis, North Carolina, and then we turned around and moved back to Charlotte and then we moved to another city in North Carolina and then moved back to Charlotte. Then we left Charlotte and we went to Atlanta. Then we left Atlanta and moved to Dothan, Alabama, and then we left Dothan, Alabama, and moved to Waco, Texas. The main reason we moved a lot was because my dad was in baseball and we went to Waco, Texas, and moved to Greensboro, North Carolina. Then we moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, and from there we moved to North Charleston, South Carolina, and then we moved to Charleston, South Carolina. From there my dad was supposed to go to Newberry, South Carolina and that's when my mother said to him, "Reeder, I don't want to be a vagabond. We're moving all over the place. Let's get back to Charlotte." The next thing I know, we're back in Charlotte and I'm now eight years old. That all happened in four years.

I took a look at just following Jesus – He's in his mother's womb, they are in Nazareth and in the ninth month of pregnancy they leave there and go to Bethlehem. They are there anywhere from a couple of months to two years and have already lived in two places. They start out in a stable and then they move into a house. So Joseph starts in Nazareth, and then he is going to Bethlehem in the stable. We don't know how long but probably a week at the most and then from a stable, by the time the wise men get there, to a house and we don't know how long he is there, likely up into two years since Herod's attempt to destroy the child was to kill anyone up

to two years of age. Then he's told in a dream to take the mother and the child because of the treachery of Herod that's about to fall upon Bethlehem.

When I take the people to Bethlehem, I'm able to take them to the cave that contains literally somewhere between 75 to 150 skeletons of children that they say in Bethlehem are the skulls and bones of the innocent ones that were destroyed. I feel very odd when I stand there and look at that. It's right outside right next to the Church of the Nativity there in Bethlehem. But Joseph is warned to leave so he goes down into Egypt in obedience to God's Word. So in obedience to God's Word, Joseph was living in Nazareth. In obedience to God's Word, he goes to Bethlehem and then obedience to God's Word, he goes to Egypt. Then the angel tells him it's time to go back because Herod the Great is dead so he comes back to the hill country of Judah. Then he is warned and sees the treachery of Archelaus and if you think Herod the Great was paranoid and treacherous, Archelaus learned a lot from his daddy and multiplied the treachery. In fact, one of his opening acts was to kill 3,000 people just to tell everybody not to cross him.

In just this brief time from the conception of Jesus in the womb of the virgin, then about six months later to Bethlehem in a stable, and then some days later, to a house in Bethlehem and then to Egypt. Then somewhere from three months to about a year, they then leave Egypt and come back to the hill country where they're there only for a short time, and then end up back in Nazareth. Now, how are we to see that? Well, obviously Joseph is not a vagabond. I'll just give you two thoughts that struck me about it.

Number one, you're seeing the work of God's grace in Joseph and in Mary, so that whenever God's Word comes, they obey and follow. You see a fearless faithfulness. The angel said to Mary when he told her what her calling was to be, "Mary, don't fear." She responded, "Behold your maidservant. Let it be done to me, according to Your Word." The angel told Joseph, "Don't be afraid to take her as your wife for that which is within her is not there by immorality. It is there by the unique conception of the virgin and keep her a virgin that she gives birth as a virgin." So why do you think Joseph was in Nazareth? He was a small businessman and it was a very small town. Here's why he's there. They are moving, not out of irresponsibility, but out of obedience. When God's Word sends them, they go.

Secondly, there's something else I want you to see. Not only do you see the God given God grace produced fearlessness of obedience in Mary and Joseph to the Lord, but we the immutable faithfulness of God to His Word. If I was to ask you, why are they in Nazareth? You would probably respond thinking it had to do with his job. No, no, he's in Nazareth because the Scripture said that the Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah. The scepter shall not leave the tribe of Judah and the Messiah will also be from the line of Jesse and David and He would be the heir to the throne of David. What do we have in Nazareth? The two heirs of the throne of David, a forgotten line of a king are right there in Nazareth because that is where God has them. The reason they go to Bethlehem is in obedience to be submissive to their rulers, to pay their taxes and to be registered. They're fearlessly faithful, even in the closing days of her pregnancy, to go there.

Why else are they there? They're there not because of a registration but because the Scriptures, hundreds of years before in Micah 5:2, [2] *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.* Why are they there at the stable? They are there in obedience to God, yet as he's making the best provision he can, it's actually fulfilling hundreds of year-old prophecy where Isaiah 7:14 says, [14] *Therefore the Lord himself*

will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel.

Even before that it says in Genesis 3:15, *[15] I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.* Here a virgin will have a seed who will defeat Satan. Why are they there in that house? They are in that house to be obedient to the Lord in Bethlehem, where the regal kings will come with regal gifts as Satan through Herod seeks to destroy the seed of the virgin. That is fulfilling another prophecy in Jeremiah 31:15 which says *[15] Thus says the LORD: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more."* Ramah is Bethlehem and Rachel who is Israel, is weeping over her children.

Then that sends Joseph to Egypt. Why is he in Egypt? He is protecting his wife in obedience to God's Word which is right but there is something more. He's going to Egypt to fulfill the prophecy in Deuteronomy 4:20 which says *[20] But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of His own inheritance, as you are this day.* And a prophecy in Hosea 11:1 which says *[1] When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.* Do you realize that the entire movement of the nation of Israel, out of Egypt, up to the Promised Land, was there to point to the coming of the Messiah who would deliver us from our sins? Out of Egypt will I call My Son. It is fulfillment of God's Word. When Joseph resides to the hill country and sees that he can't stay there, where does he go? He goes to Nazareth, that fulfills the words of the prophets – He shall be called a Nazarene.

Here is my question for you. When God's Word calls you to worship, to witness, to be a Godly man or woman, not to earn your salvation, but to glorify your Savior, will you rely on the Holy Spirit and the grace of God in fearless faithfulness? That is the obedience that moved them from place to place. Why is Quirinius in place to give a decree in Rome? This was prophesied in Daniel. It is the sovereign hand of God moving nations, Assyrians, Babylonians, Medo-Persians, Greeks and then Romans. God moves heaven and earth. His Word will never fail.

The reason they moved when they did and ended where they are is obedience enabled by God's grace out of love to Christ who has come to redeem us. Why are they there? God's Word is being fulfilled in every single move. Hear this; Thy Word is truth, and it is never broken. So if you come to Christ today, or if you've come to Christ, His Word says in Romans 8:1, *[1] There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* Jesus says in John 6:47, *[47] Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes (in Me) has eternal life.* Know this; God's Word is true and it is fulfilled in Jesus. When you follow Him, know this; no matter where He leads you, as you're obedient to His Word, He will never leave you nor forsake you. Let's pray.

Prayer:

God, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Speak to our hearts and fill them to overflowing with the confidence that is found in Jesus. Give us by the Holy Spirit and we confess we so easily falter for that's why I'm asking this. Please start with me. God, give us a fearless faithfulness to Your Word, no matter where it takes us. Jesus, please give us an unbreakable confidence that You will always fulfill Your Word and be with Your people. I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.