

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 24, 2017**

THE NAME

Matthew 1:18-25

Both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke give us accounts of the birth of Jesus. Luke gives considerably more detail and tells the story from the perspective of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Matthew's account, on the other hand, is more sparse but provides some information not found in Luke's Gospel – specifically, Joseph's dilemma brought about by Mary's pregnancy, the appearance of the angel to Joseph in a dream, and Joseph's response to what the angel tells him.

I don't know if you've ever thought about this, but in the brief appearances he makes in the Bible, Joseph doesn't speak a word. Not a single word. But his actions speak louder, perhaps, than his words ever could. His actions reveal his character, and show that God knew what He was doing not only in choosing Mary to be the mother of the Lord Jesus, but in choosing Joseph to be the legally-recognized father of Jesus. Only a man of Joseph's godly character and faith could have handled a situation like this.

The circumstances of Mary's pregnancy must have been excruciatingly difficult for Joseph. In our culture today, of course, pregnancy outside of marriage does not carry the same kind of stigma it did in the time of Mary and Joseph, or at earlier times in the history of our country. Times have changed. As followers of the Lord Jesus and members of His church, we still believe and teach that sexual intimacy and, therefore, pregnancy outside of marriage are not what God intends or desires. The proper place for experiencing the joy of sexual intimacy and for bearing children is within the bonds of marriage. At the same time, we don't believe in the old Puritan practice of branding sexual sinners with "the scarlet letter," as they did to Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous novel. We are all sinners, sexual or otherwise, in need of God's forgiving, rescuing, transforming grace. And the church is a place of grace for sinners of all kinds.

Nevertheless, the pregnancy of Mary presented Joseph with a heart-rending dilemma. "Betrothal," in those days, was more weighty and binding than engagement is today. Today, a couple can break off their engagement without any legal consequences. Not so back in the day of Mary and Joseph. Marriages were usually arranged by parents for their sons and daughters, as is still the case in some cultures today. When the betrothal took place, the couple were considered to be husband and wife, even though they did not yet live together as husband and wife, and they did not yet come together in sexual union. They were considered married, even though they still lived apart. The betrothal was a legally binding agreement that could only be broken by an official divorce decree. Sexual intimacy during the betrothal period was taboo. And infidelity – sexual intimacy with someone other than the betrothed husband or wife – was considered adultery and could carry the penalty of death by stoning.

In Luke 1, we learn that Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel, who told her that she would become pregnant through the intervention of the Holy Spirit, and that her baby would be the

actual Son of God (Luke 1:26-38). But Joseph didn't know that. At least not when he found out that Mary was pregnant. What Joseph did know was that he wasn't the baby's father. He knew that he was not responsible for Mary's pregnancy, because he and Mary had not yet been together. As far as Joseph knew, Mary had been unfaithful to him and had become pregnant as a result. He was, as you can imagine, disturbed by this development, deeply troubled by Mary's apparent promiscuity and the embarrassment it had brought to them both as well as their families.

Joseph, Matthew tells us, was a noble and "righteous man" (1:19). He wanted to do the right thing. And he wanted to do it in the right way. He cared about Mary and "did not want to expose her to public disgrace" (1:19), so he "determined to take care of things quietly" (1:19, *MSG*). If he were to go ahead with the marriage, it would be a tacit admission that Mary's baby was his, that the two of them had jumped the gun and engaged in sexual intimacy during the period of their betrothal or engagement.

While Joseph was wrestling with this, trying to figure out what to do, he was visited by an angel in a dream, who gave him the startling news that, contrary to appearances, Mary had not been unfaithful, but that the baby conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit (1:20). Her pregnancy was divinely planned and orchestrated, and it took place without the involvement of a human father in any way. It is not the sort of thing that happens every day. In fact, it is the sort of thing that has ever happened only once. Never before and never since. Only once. In the conception and birth of Jesus, God the Holy Spirit – the third Person of the Trinity – made the eternally pre-existent second Person of the Trinity into a human being "with bones and brains and blood, with lungs and lips and lymph nodes, with head and heart and hands" just like us (Douglas O'Donnell, *Matthew*, 43). It is a mystery. And it is a miracle. There is no other way to describe it.

Surprisingly (at least to me), Joseph, like Mary, believes the angel. He takes the angel at his word. Though we can't know everything that he was thinking, Joseph responds in a very matter-of-fact manner. When he wakes up, he does exactly what the angel has told him to do. He dismisses the idea of divorcing Mary, regardless of the stigma and gossip he and Mary will have to endure. He marries her. He takes her into his home as his wife. But the two of them do not come together in sexual union until after the baby is born. And, as instructed by the angel, Joseph gives the baby the name Jesus.

After the events of the birth of Jesus, Luke says that "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). I can imagine that Joseph did some pondering in his heart as well. It seems like there would be a lot of pondering to do.

But neither Joseph nor Mary nor the angel is the central figure in this story. The central figure, of course, is Jesus Himself. And central in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus are two names by which we know Him.

THE NAME: JESUS

First, as we see in verse 21, is the name Jesus. The angel says to Joseph: “She (Mary) will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save his people from their sins.” The name “Jesus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Yeshua* or *Yehoshua* (Joshua in English), which means “The LORD Saves” or “The LORD Is Savior.” Jesus’ name expressed His mission. His name expressed the purpose for which He came, the reason He was born. He came to “save His people” – including you and me – “from (our) sins.”

Do I need to try to convince you that we are sinners – all of us – who are unable to save ourselves from the guilt and consequences of our sins, and that we desperately need a Savior?

Let me tell you a story that illustrates something of the nature of sin and our need for a Savior. When I was a boy, I loved baseball with a passion. And I loved to collect baseball cards. I would ride my bike 3 miles from home to the little general store in the village of Rockland, PA, and for a nickel buy a 5-pack of baseball cards in a wrapper with bubble gum. It used to be that there were baseball cards on the back of certain kinds of cereal boxes, too. At one point when I was a teenager, I think I had a collection of more than 2,000 baseball cards. Even though I never made any money from them, and they are long gone, collecting cards – and memorizing baseball statistics – was a big deal for me when I was growing up.

I recently read about a young man named Michael, now engaged in full-time Christian ministry (not to be confused with anyone you know named Michael!), who confessed that when he was in 5th grade, he and two friends were involved in organized crime. They formed a syndicate whose sole purpose was to steal baseball cards. Over the course of a year or so, until they got caught, they stole thousands of dollars’ worth of baseball cards. Not because they couldn’t afford to buy them; they all had money from their allowances to buy plenty of cards; but simply because they wanted to. They carefully plotted their course of action. They set their sights on certain stores and particular cards. They even had a name for their group – BIFL, which stood for “Borrow It For Life.”

Michael says he knew it was wrong, but somehow it felt good to do what was wrong. (You know that feeling, don’t you? In our fallen nature, it is something we all have in common.) Michael and his friends wanted to steal. They wanted to see if they could get away with it. For a time, they did. So they persisted in doing the wrong – the evil – they wanted to do.

What they did, Michael says, was not unlike what St. Augustine describes in his famous *Confessions*. Augustine stole pears with a gang of teens, not because they were hungry or because there was something special about the pears, but because they took delight in doing evil. Augustine says: “I had no motive for my wickedness except wickedness itself. It was foul, and I loved it. I loved the self-destruction, I loved my fall, not the object for which I had fallen but my fall itself” (Augustine, *Confessions*, 29).

Augustine saw that it was not the pears that posed a problem, but his heart and its strong desire to gratify evil. He admits that he and his friends didn’t even enjoy the pears. They gave them to pigs to eat.

Eventually, Michael got caught stealing cards from a store and his life in organized crime came to an end. It wasn't until years later, though, that he came to realize that apart from the grace of God, we humans are incurably fallen. "(W)e fixate on and feed wickedness for its own sake until it consumes us." (Adapted from Michael Chen, "Organized Crime", CCO Advent Devotional, December 20, 2017.)

Only the grace of God, which comes free of charge to people like us who don't deserve it and never will; only the sacrificial suffering and death of Jesus on the cross for us to "save His people from their sins" can, in fact, save us from our sins, our selves, and our sinful, selfish desires.

That is why Jesus came. That is why Jesus was born. He was born to die, because His death was necessary to accomplish His mission to save us from our sins. His death on the cross for you and me was as much a part of God's plan as was the miracle of His conception and birth. His name – Jesus – defined His purpose, which was to save us from our sins and to bring us back into right relationship with God, something we could never do ourselves.

THE GIFT THAT MAKES US SWALLOW OUR PRIDE

Here is another way of looking at it. In his book *Hidden Christmas*, Tim Keller writes: "Christmas is about receiving gifts, but consider how challenging it is to receive certain kinds of gifts. Some gifts by their very nature make you swallow your pride. Imagine opening a gift on Christmas morning from a friend ... and it is a dieting book. Then you take off another ribbon and wrapper and you find it is another book from another friend, *Overcoming Selfishness*. If you say to them, 'Thank you very much,' you are in a sense admitting (that you are overweight and obnoxious).

"In other words, some gifts are hard to receive, because to do so is to admit you have flaws and weaknesses and you need help. Perhaps on some occasion you had a friend who figured out you were in financial trouble and came to you and offered a large sum of money to get you out of your predicament. If that has ever happened to you, you probably found that to receive the gift meant swallowing your pride."

But here is the thing: "There has never been a gift offered that makes you swallow your pride to the depths that the gift of Jesus Christ requires us to do. Christmas means that we are so lost, so unable to save ourselves, that nothing less than the death of the Son of God Himself could save us. That means you are not somebody who can pull yourself together and live a moral and good life."

You are not. You cannot. I cannot. Augustine could not. Michael could not. Tim Keller cannot. None of us can pull ourselves together and live the kind of life that pleases God. This is the bad news of the gospel. But it is the prelude to the good news of the gospel, which is the best news the world can ever hear.

Jesus came to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, no matter how hard or long we try. Jesus came to fulfill the meaning of His name, which is to "save His people" – all who trust in

His saving work, all who believe in him and receive Him as Savior and Lord – “from their sins.” He came into the world, as Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:15, “to save sinners.” As it says in John 3:17, “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.”

If you have received the gift of Jesus as Savior and Lord in your life, if you have put your trust in Him and His saving work, then you know the meaning of Christmas, and you can celebrate it with unbounded gratitude and joy. If you don’t know Jesus in a personal way as your Savior and Lord, if you have never come to Him in a spirit of repentance for your sins, if you have not put your faith in His sacrificial death for your sins, you are missing out. But you don’t have to. It is time to swallow your pride. It is time to open your heart to Jesus. Because He came to save you from your sins. Jesus came to take away the sins of the world (John 1:29), including yours, if you will trust in Him. Put your trust in him today. Put your trust in Him right now.

THE NAME: IMMANUEL

There is one other name. Jesus, as it says in Matthew 1:23, was also given the name Immanuel, which means “God with us.” If the name Jesus defines His mission, the name Immanuel reveals His true identity. His coming fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. In His becoming a baby and living among us, Jesus was God with us, God in flesh and blood. So, Christmas tells us that God is not a distant deity, uncaring, uninterested, or uninvolved. He has not left us to find our way in the world or to make sense of our lives on our own. Christmas means that God is with us. And Jesus promised His disciples to be with them – with us – always (Matthew 28:20).

How is He with us always? Since His ascension into heaven and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, He is with us in the person of God the Holy Spirit, who is God-with-us forever.

Which means that wherever you go, to Iraq or Afghanistan or Haiti or anywhere else, God is with you. Immanuel.

Whatever heartaches or hardships or disappointments you may face, God is with you. Immanuel.

When your health is threatened, when cancer or other illness invades, when you’re having a hard time making ends meet, when things are not going well at work or home or school, remember: Immanuel.

When you feel close to God and when you feel as though God is absent, remember: Immanuel.

When life throws at you more than you can handle, remember: Immanuel.

In the best of times and in the worst of times, remember: Immanuel.

Christmas means that God is *with* us. It also means that God is *for* us. That is Paul's triumphant testimony in Romans 8. How do we know that God is for us? Look to the stable where Jesus was born. Look to the birth of the One who came to save us from our sins. Look to the cross, where the love of God for you and me and the whole world is expressed in suffering and sacrifice. Look to the empty tomb. Jesus is the sign – more than that, He is the proof – that God is for us. And His love will never let us go.

The name Jesus expresses the essence of the purpose of His coming to us: He came to save His people from their sins. From *our* sins.

The name Immanuel expresses the essence of His identity. He was and is nothing less than God with us.

Rejoice in the wonder of who He is and what He has done this Christmas and always.

If you have never done so, there is no better time than right now – right this moment – to get right with God, to stop running from Jesus, to swallow your pride, to trust Him to take away your sins, to open your heart to receive Him as your Savior and King. If you have drifted in your faith, if you have wandered from the path of following Jesus, if you're not as close to God as you once were, now is the time to come back to the Savior and let Him have His way in your life.

If you do, you will receive the best Christmas gift ever. And this will be a Christmas you never forget.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.