

The Gospel of the Kingdom Pt 3

The Birth of Jesus

Usually, we only revisit the birth of Jesus at Christmas time, and then we mostly focus on the Luke account of His birth. For Matthew, this account is not the warm and fuzzy feeling of the Luke account, as much as it is a historical narrative that ties in with the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. He focuses on that which brings attention to Jesus' place in history as the fulfillment of the promises of God, not only to His people, but to all the nations.

In the movies, origin stories for our heroes are all the rage. This is Jesus' origin story. Think of your own origin story and how God was involved with your life, even before your birth.

1. The Angelic Announcement of the Birth of Jesus – *Matthew 1:18-25*

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. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

The betrothal is a mutual promise or contract for a future marriage (Deut 20:7; Jer 2:2; Luke 1:27).

The selection of the bride was followed by the betrothal, not to be entirely equated with the modern concept of engagement. A betrothal was undertaken by a friend or agent representing the bridegroom and by the parents representing the bride. It was confirmed by oaths and was accompanied with presents to the bride and often to the bride's parents.

The betrothal was celebrated by a feast. In some instances, it was customary for the bridegroom to place a ring, a token of love and fidelity, on the bride's finger. In Hebrew custom, betrothal was actually part of the marriage process. A change of intention by one of the partners after he or she was betrothed was a serious matter, subject in some instances to penalty by fine.

A Jewish betrothal could be dissolved only by the man's giving the woman a certificate of divorce. A betrothal usually lasted for one year. During that year the couple were known as husband and wife, although they did not have the right to be united sexually.

Betrothal was much more closely linked with marriage than our modern engagement. But the actual marriage took place only when the bridegroom took the bride to his home and the marriage was consummated in the sexual union.

The Luke narrative starts with Gabriel announcing to Mary that she will conceive by the Holy Spirit. When she does conceive, she apparently goes to stay with her cousin Elizabeth for three months. When she returns, there is no hiding that she is pregnant. It appears that she hid her pregnancy from Joseph for a time. How could she explain that an angel had appeared to her and told her that she would conceive as a virgin by the Holy Spirit. Yeah, right!

At this point there is no hiding that she is pregnant, and the year betrothal is not up yet, so he decides to divorce her.

Now, he is in his right, to divorce her, but not only that, he is in his right to denounce her as an adulteress before the whole town. Instead, being the man that he is, he decides not to shame her. He isn't thinking of himself and the shame that this will bring him. He is thinking about her and what it will do to her. He loved her and the narrative says that he was a "just man". He is acting out of more than justice; he is acting out of love and mercy.

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).

It is at this time, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, we can only assume that it is Gabriel as well, but it is not recorded in the narrative.

Now, I've never seen an angel, but seeing as the first words out of their mouths are usually, "Do not be afraid", it would appear that seeing one is a major deal that stops you in your tracks and causes your knees to shake. But even still, what is amazing about the Luke and Matthew narratives is that both Mary and Joseph believed the angel and were obedient to do as told. Both of them believed that she would be pregnant by the Holy Spirit, not a man, and something that has never, ever happened before or since. This is the very definition of the impossible.

The angel affirms the promise that God will be with His disciples in every age, to empower them in their commission to "make disciples of all nations". Jesus himself reaffirms this in the closing words of Matthew's Gospel.

Isa 66:18-19

"For I know their works and their thoughts, and the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see my glory, 19 and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Pul, and Lud, who draw the bow, to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands afar off, that have not heard my fame or seen my glory. And they shall declare my glory among the nations.

Just as an aside, Tampa Bay Vineyard, formerly known as JesusChurch, got its' start as Coastlands Vineyard based on this verse.

We're not even out of the first chapter and Matthew finds himself quoting an Old Testament prophecy that points to Jesus, as the Messiah:

Isa 7:14

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

This prophecy was given to Isaiah on the occasion of a threat of attack on Judah and points to God's enduring promise for the line of David.

The fact that the angel says, "Behold", is significant. Behold is an imperative, it catches your attention, it tells you that what follows is very important. The angel knows that he just dropped a bomb on Joseph telling him that his betrothed is pregnant by the Holy Spirit and he doesn't want Joseph's mind on some rabbit trail. He wants Joseph to know that this is not some random act, but it is as the result of the fulfillment of God's promise to His people and that it comes straight from the prophet Isaiah.

While the title "Immanuel" in the prophecy means "God with us"; the angel tells Joseph to call this child, Jesus, which means "God saves" or in the Hebrew, *Yeshua* or Joshua.

The fact that she is a virgin is significant, because Jesus being born of woman makes Him fully human. But not having a human father means that the sin of Adam is not visited upon Him and makes Him the Son of God. He was born without a trace of sin and is both fully human and fully God.

Because of the fact that Jesus lived as a man, we know that He fully understands our experiences and our struggles.

Heb 4:15-16

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Because He is God, He has the power and authority to deliver us from sin.

Col 2:13-14

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Joseph's actions indicate four qualities about Joseph:

- a) His righteousness
- b) His discretion and sensitivity
- c) His responsiveness to God
- d) His self-discipline

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.

2. The Visit of the Wise Men - Matt 2:1-12

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of

them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: 6 "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

Herod was not a legitimate king from the line of David. He was born in Edom, and was the son of Antipater, whom Caesar had appointed procurator (Governor of Judea, Samaria and Galilee). Herod in turn was appointed King by Rome. He was a master builder who curried favor with the priests and the religious elite of Jerusalem because he restored the Temple. He also built theaters, palaces, cities, and fortresses. However, he was an evil man who murdered his own wife, several sons, and other relatives. He had a tenuous hold on power which was dependent on keeping the Jews from revolting against Rome. This news of a new king being born threatened his hold on power, as it did to the ruling class of Jerusalem.

Why is it that only Matthew includes the narrative of the three wise men. Again, it helps to illustrate and tie in Jesus' birth with the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

First, where the wise men refer to his star rising:

Num 24:17

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;

And then, when the priests correctly remember that He will come out of Bethlehem:

Mic 5:2

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,

Herod is rightfully threatened and tries to enlist the wise men in helping him locate this child by lying to them.

7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." 9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

First of all, in spite of how most nativity scenes show the wise men at the manger. The text clearly states that they were in a house by the time the wise men found them.

The other thing that we need to know is that there is no Biblical basis for there being 3 wise men. It could have been as few as two, or as many as five. The number 3 comes from the number of gifts that they brought Jesus.

- Frankincense is a resin that is used ceremonially, and the only incense permitted on the altar. (Exodus 30:9; 34-38)
- Myrrh is a sap used in incense and perfume and as a stimulant tonic.
- The first two gifts are more ceremonial, but nevertheless very valuable and of course gold has always been the international basis of commerce.

Conclusion

We have talked before that God is not limited by time and space as we are.

While the Bible is composed of many different books written by many different authors, there is only one source and inspiration, which is God.

There is a thread through all of Scripture that manifests in different ways. That thread is His love for us and His desire to have an intimate relationship with His creation.

In spite of our fallen nature, God is faithful and true. He constantly reveals His love through His promises (Prophecies) and in the fulfillment of those promises.

It is said that God's love language is obedience. Both Mary and Joseph, upon having heard from God, were obedient to Him, regardless of the consequence and the possible exposure to shame and humiliation. In the face of what was humanly impossible and improbable, they trusted God. As a result of their obedience, God provided a way for us to have a relationship with Him.

Joseph thought he only had two options when he discovered that Mary was pregnant:

- a) Divorce her quietly.
- b) Have her stoned for her sin.

So often we think that our options are limited, But God.

But God often show us that there are more options available than we think. Although Joseph seemed to be doing the right thing in divorcing her, God's guidance helped Him make a better decision.

When our decisions affect the lives of others, we must always seek God's wisdom.