

The Birth of the Savior

Our reading is from Matthew 1:18-25. This Christmas Eve we look at the birth of the Savior as a miracle of the virgin conception through Mary. This miracle is usually referred to as the Virgin Birth. And, of course, Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, who remained a virgin until after Jesus was born. But the birth itself was not the miracle. Jesus was born in a very normal way, as are other babies. The miracle was the way he was conceived supernaturally within Mary's womb, without the involvement of a human father.

Follow as I read **Matthew 1:18-25**:

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

*²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"*

which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Some of you will be familiar with this story of a miraculous Christmas event that took place here in Flanders, Belgium during World War I:

"On December 24, 1914, German and English troops faced each other from the relative safety of their trenches across that no man's land lying between them. Suddenly, the silence was broken, not by gunfire, but by the strains of *Silent Night* arising from the German position. It wasn't long before the English troops responded with a Yuletide hymn of their own. Then an amazing sight startled the eyes of the English soldiers. A German soldier holding a small tree arrayed with lighted candles began to walk across the terrain toward the English lines. This miraculous scene occasioned the declaration of a truce followed by English and German troops greeting one another, exchanging small gifts and singing songs of Christmas. Word of this incredible phenomenon reached the High Command of both sides. On Christmas Day both armies moved from their positions to engage in the carnage of war at other battlefields. However, on Christmas Eve 1914 on a field in Flanders, there was Peace on Earth" (R Petrucci).

Tonight we celebrate the Christmas miracle of the conception and birth of Jesus Christ within the Virgin Mary. The conception of Jesus was integral to the whole plan of salvation history, God's plan to redeem fallen and lost mankind. This miracle affected not just armies or nations but the whole world. This miracle, though microscopic, impacted the world and will, in God's time impact all of creation.

The birth of the Savior was conceived first within the heart of God even before the creation of the world. The covenant promise of salvation was first issued to Abraham and found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The miracle of Christmas is not only that God *could* save us through the gift of his Son, but that God *would* save us. It's a miracle of love and grace that he would love us that much, in spite of our sin and unworthiness. John writes in his Prologue, The Word, Jesus, "came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (Jn. 1:11-12). The miracle of the virgin conception originated in God's heart, and is a gift that was delivered by the Holy Spirit.

The angel appeared to Joseph to explain the inexplicable. Joseph was bewildered by the discovery of his beloved fiancée's pregnancy. To be engaged in that first century Galilean culture was to be legally and permanently bound to one another. The engaged couple did not consummate the marriage sexually until after the wedding. Mary's pregnancy could be explained only by the fact that she must have been unfaithful to her fiancé, Joseph. Her apparent sin was punishable by death. *The Message* paraphrases verse 19 as, "Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced." Being a righteous and kind man, Joseph decided to "divorce her quietly."

At that moment of crisis, the angel of the Lord appeared to tell Joseph that his virgin fiancée was pregnant by the supernatural action of the Holy Spirit. The child was to be named Jesus; the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "Joshua," meaning Savior (21). He would save from the dire sin, guilt and death problem facing all mankind. The miraculous conception of Jesus was an essential component in God's becoming a man and yet being divine, in his being the God-Man. The angel said also that this special Son would be called "Immanuel—which means, "God with us" (23).

The virgin conception made possible the uniting of the full deity and the full humanity of God in one Person. Only by his being born of a woman could we think of him as fully human as we are. And if he were born of man and woman it would be difficult to think of him as fully divine, if his origin were like ours in every way. God ordained a combination of human and divine influence with the conception of Christ.

The miracle was conceived first and eternally within the heart of God, but actually and historically within the womb of the Virgin Mary. When Joseph discovered Mary's pregnancy, the angel of the Lord convinced him of her miraculous, Spirit-wrought conception. So, Joseph took Mary to be his wife, although they did not consummate their marriage in sexual union until after the birth of Jesus. So Jesus was both virgin conceived and also virgin born.

The real, fundamental miracle is the Incarnation. As Peter Rhea Jones said, we don't believe in the deity of Jesus because of the Virgin Birth, but we believe in the virgin conception and birth because of the deity of Jesus. He is the divine, uniquely born Son of God. The miracle was not even so much how he could be fully God and fully man, but *why*. Why the perfect, sinless, glorified Son would submit to taking on our humanity and why he would submit to the abject humiliation of his lowly birth, his difficult and opposed public ministry, and his ignominious, unspeakable suffering in his cross.

The angel told Joseph that Mary would give birth to a son, and that his name would be Jesus, "because he will save his people from their sins." Joshua means "one who saves," and the Jews were looking for a Deliverer who would bring immediate political liberation and an outwardly forceful kingdom on earth. Few expected that Messiah would be a suffering servant who would stoop to the level of mankind and be a humble servant, even to the point of dying on a cross.

Years ago I read a story from one of world-wide evangelist Billy Graham's sermons that gives us a homely but also a helpful illustration of the miracle of the Incarnation. Says Graham, "One day I was walking along the road with my (then) little boy, who was five years of age, and we stepped on an anthill. We killed a lot of ants and wounded a lot of others, and I said to Ned, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could go down there and help those ants rebuild their house and bury their dead and take care of their wounded?" He said, "But Daddy, we are too big. We can't get down there and help those ants."

I don't aspire to be an ant, even to embark on such a noble project, but Graham was giving his son a good object lesson at a teachable moment. For God's eternal Son, the Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, to condescend to rescue us humans in his kenosis was an even greater self-humiliation than it would be for us to stoop to the level of an ant.

The birth of the Savior means that the Triune God has come to earth and into the lives of all who believe in Jesus. This is an amazing thought, that holy God, the transcendent mighty Creator who dwells in inapproachable light, has come to make himself available to us as our sympathetic and approachable Great High Priest.

By grace through faith in Christ Jesus, he is born into our hearts. Just as was true for Mary and Joseph, there is nothing we have done for Jesus to be born

and there is nothing we can do to contribute to his presence in our lives. It's all the gift of God. When we by faith conceive Christ in our hearts, that is, submit to God's conceiving him within our hearts, we're born again. The Holy Spirit would not only come to be alongside us as our Helper, to be with us, but would come to be "inside" us. He who gave life to the conceived baby Jesus is the one who gives us new life when we believe.

Jesus was generated within my heart many years ago. Our text says, "This is how the birth of Jesus came about" (NIV). Jesus comes to us at the right time and also his salvation is till the end of this age and for all eternity. Christmas is a celebration of Jesus' first coming but also of his Second Coming, which for those of us who believe, means the consummation of our salvation and the fulfillment of all of our hopes. What we have and what we have now is but a mere "sample" of what we shall be.

The miracle of the conception of Christ can happen to each of us this Christmas Eve. The Christmas miracle in Flanders in 1914 was an amazing phenomenon. But it didn't last. The next day they returned to "the war to end all wars" as though Christmas had never happened. A lot of people's lives will go back to normal after the respite or frenzy of the holidays. And, sadly, many will experience depression during the dark days of January and February.

Some gifts make lasting contributions, and others, like a child's toy, are soon broken or forgotten. Most gifts simply add some enjoyment or perhaps provide a necessity or possibly make life easier for us. But some gifts have been known to change lives. Sometimes I think of the gift of the big black Bible my grandmother gave me, some years before my public profession of faith. That Bible looked like my hero pastor father's black pulpit Bible. As a young boy I would place that Bible on a "make believe" pulpit, a pedestal in my bedroom, and would pound on it and pretend to preach, even before I came to a full understanding of salvation. In a way, through that gift, God was calling me and shaping my life. Gifts can change lives.

If you open your heart and life to Jesus Christ, he'll come in and begin to make all things new.