

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Christmas, our yearly remembrance of the birth of Jesus, begins a few days early this year, for, in the Gospel, Matthew tells us a version of the story not heard on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day — the version of the story from Joseph's point of view, as Matthew wrote: "*Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.*" Indeed, Matthew seems to be offering an explanation to something he wrote a couple verses earlier.

The first seventeen verses of Matthew offer up the genealogy of Jesus. The Gospel begins: "*The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham*" (Matt. 1:1). He then enumerates the line of Jesus, starting with Abraham: "*Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob ...*" — or more precisely, "*Abraham begat Isaac, and Isaac begat Jacob ...*" (Matt. 1:2) — and so forth, passing through David's line — "*Jesse begat David the king, and David begat Solomon ...*" (Matt. 1:6), all the way to Joseph — "*Jacob begat Joseph*" (Matt. 1:16). But then at the end, the pattern changes. Joseph didn't beget Jesus; rather, Joseph was the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus the one who is called Christ.

"What is going on here?", the attentive reader of Matthew might have been wondering. This is the explanation that Matthew offers: Jesus wasn't Joseph's natural son; rather, Jesus, was God's Son, born of Mary, who received His flesh from Mary alone.

Joseph himself was surprised by the news of Mary's pregnancy, after all, although he was betrothed to Mary, Jesus' mother — that is, Mary and Joseph were legally bound to one another — they hadn't yet consummated the marriage.

So, Mary is pregnant, but he and Mary had not yet come together as husband and wife; the child is not his. You can imagine the hurt. Naturally, he thought Mary had been unfaithful. Joseph hadn't had a visit by the angel announcing the marvelous news. Joseph didn't have a chance to ask, "How is this so?" like Mary did.

And so, Joseph purposed to get out of this commitment and divorce her. Though no doubt hurt, still Joseph didn't want to shame Mary, so he decided to divorce her quietly. Matthew called Joseph "just"; he was that and more; he was being merciful to Mary.

But God had other plans. He sent an angel to Joseph in a dream to explain what was happening and to exhort Joseph to go forward with the marriage. "Mary has not been unfaithful to you, Joseph," the angel told him; she is the ark of the Lord, the vessel by which God has come down from heaven to dwell with man. Mary has

indeed conceived in her womb, but it's not as you imagine. The son she carries was not conceived by human copulation; he was conceived by God the Holy Spirit.

If Joseph had let her, Mary could have explained it to him, even as the angel Gabriel had explained it to Mary. Gabriel told Mary, confused by the angel's message — she was a virgin, after all — and wondering how it was all going to happen, *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God"* (Luke 1:35).

But any such attempt by Mary would surely have been futile. Yes, she had found favor with God, but who could believe such a story from a mere mortal? It's preposterous. The people of old knew how babies are made; Joseph knew ... it takes two. But not when God is involved, for nothing is *"impossible with God"* (Luke 1:37). God works miracles.

We believe in miracles still, don't we? In the account of Jesus' birth, there were several. As we've been talking about: first, the miracle conception of God's Son in the womb of Mary, and by this Divine act, mortal flesh being united with the eternal Son of God.

Second, the miracle that Mary herself would believe it, and she did, humbly: *"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word"* (Luke 1:38).

And third, that Joseph, too, would believe the angel's message delivered in a dream. And he did. At God's direction, Joseph took Mary as his wife, but did not lie with her up to the time of Jesus' birth. Just as we confess, Jesus was born of a virgin.

Matthew says matter-of-factly that Mary gave *"birth to a son,"* but you know the story of how this holy couple traveled to Bethlehem, Mary great with child, there giving birth to her firstborn son, wrapping Him up in swaddling cloths, and laying Him in a manger.

They would name Him Jesus as both Joseph and Mary had been instructed, a name that testifies to the reason the Father had sent His Son from heaven above to earth below. *"[H]e will save his people from their sins,"* the angel told Joseph; therefore, give Him the name *"Jesus,"* which means "The Lord saves."

The Christmas angel echoed this same message and expanded it: this *"baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger"* is the Savior **of the world**. The good news is for *"all people"*: *"unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord"* (Luke 2:10-12).

How could this little baby, born in lowliness, accomplish this miraculous feat? That's the wonder of Christ and of Christmas. He is the Savior of the World because He is Immanuel, "God with us," and more, as Seminarian Wessel proclaimed last Wednesday. "***God with us***" means '**God for us.**'" This is the Church's united confession about Jesus. He "**for us men and for our salvation** came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man; and was crucified also **for us.**" Yes, our "Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God" (Nicene Creed) took on our mortal flesh that He might carry our sin and be our Savior, that He might offer up Himself unto death for the sins of the world.

Only God Himself could accomplish this. Only Immanuel could live the perfect life as our substitute; only "God with us," conceived by the Holy Spirit, carried in the Virgin's womb, and birthed by her, could die the perfect, vicarious death. Jesus is that Immanuel, and He has done it.

Moreover, what He has accomplished **for us**, He also gives **to us** by word and sacrament. Therefore, receive the forgiveness Your Savior won and bestows. Hear, believe, and be forgiven. Eat and drink yet more of that forgiveness in the holy Sacrament offered today, and be assured of your salvation. And come back to church this week for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and celebrate with even more gusto the birth of Jesus, Immanuel, our Salvation.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.