

*Even Now...Something Waits to Be Born
Out of the Ordinary and Forgotten*

[Matthew 1:17-25](#)

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. In the four weeks before Christmas, we watch and wait for the coming of Christ. This is a season for hope. Not the good deal, you-can-have-it-all-now kind of hope that retailers and politicians offer; but a watching and waiting hope, the kind that invites us to be attentive to people and things at the edges of our lives. To be ready for something that will almost certainly surprise us. And this year, that kind of hope seems particularly necessary, doesn't it?

Advent is a peculiarly counter-cultural season for us. It's really almost the opposite of the way we are encouraged to live—by advertisers, big stores, even social groups that all have to squeeze in one more special gathering in this month. We live in that culture too. But I hope that on Sunday mornings you'll come and find here a little respite and grounding and peace.

Here, we will, for the four weeks of Advent, live a little quieter. We'll stay with the darkness until the light comes. We'll wait for a light that is true and reliable, not just a flash that lasts for one extravagant day of presents and food, or that leads us down a dark alley and leaves us there. This year especially, we need a light that is strong enough to reach into our darkness and claim us. A light we can keep coming back to.

For each of these Sundays in Advent, we're going to focus on the first chapter of the four Gospels, the stories told by Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. Each of those writers wanted us to *know* this person whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. Jesus had changed their lives; they believed he could change the world. They wanted us to understand this Jesus who'd looked to them as full of love and grace and forgiveness and healing as they'd imagined only God could be. This man whose presence stayed with people long after he was gone, making it feel like he was still alive inside of them.

I want to know: What seemed important to say *first*? What did those writers want us to know *before* we hear the stories about healing and feeding, new lessons about how to love your neighbor? What was it that would say, right from the start, "Here is good news for you"?

Matthew begins with a genealogy. We didn't read all of it this morning; but let me summarize it quickly. It begins with Abraham, the first of a tribe who became God's people. And then Matthew sets out fourteen generations between Abraham and Jesus. But the point of this listing of names wasn't Matthew's careful research into ancestry records and bloodlines. Instead, he chose for this genealogy names whose stories his readers would have been familiar with. Stories about fathers who weren't always good to their sons, brothers who cheated their way into first place, kings who stole their wives and murdered their rivals. Prostitutes; teenagers; unambitious minor characters who seemed to accomplish nothing significant in their lifetimes. These are the people whose lives brought us Jesus, he was saying.

And then begins the part we read this morning. "*This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place [Matthew says]. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.*" And then Joseph had a dream, Matthew

says. And only because of what he heard in that dream, he decided to marry her, even with his misgivings and doubts.

Who begins a testament of good news about a Godlike man with a story about his mother's illegitimate pregnancy and his parents' almost-broken engagement? Who would put that story at the top of a resume? What was it Matthew wanted us to understand first about the way God entered human life?

Right from the beginning, Matthew is saying: You should know that those angels weren't hovering nearby every minute. All the rough edges had not been smoothed out. This is real life; there is darkness mixed with light everywhere, all the time.

What Matthew couldn't have known is that is we, here, 2,000 years later, have heard his words so many times over our lives that our eyes glaze over every Christmas season when someone begins to read them again. And so today I want to tell you a story that maybe Matthew would have added if he were here, a story about Jesus' grandparents, the parents of Joseph. A story buried somewhere in that genealogy.

Asher and Leah, let's call those grandparents. They lived in Nazareth, although they had both come from families to the south. They'd been married for twenty-five years. They had wanted more children—both of them had hoped for a large family, full of both boys and girls—but they'd had only one. Their son, Joseph, had been born years after they'd given up thinking about the kind of noisy, happy, clattery house they had imagined they'd have together.

They loved their one son with their whole hearts, poured their lives into his. They'd paid careful attention to his schooling—academic and religious. Asher had made sure that Joseph spent time in the carpenter shop that was the family business, so that one day he too would be able to support his own family. Not too much time—a boy should have time to play with friends and freedom to make his own decisions—but enough. Enough to have a solid footing in his life, something at least to fall back on. Maybe they would have lots of grandchildren...who knew?

Joseph had been a good son. He brought them lots of happiness; he saved them from a life that might have been too quiet. They thought he'd been listening to the things they were trying to teach him. But now he was 19, and he brought his parents more worry than he ever had when he was small. There's this girlfriend, Mary. At first, they were glad to see Joseph make a nice relationship with a girl. It's time. And Mary seems to come from nice family too. But lately, as they lay in bed at night waiting to hear the front door open so that they'd know Joseph was home safely, Leah had begun to wonder. "Aren't her parents worried about their daughter being out so late?" she'd whisper to Asher. "Are we the only ones who are paying attention?"

It's not that they don't like Mary; they do. She seems like a nice enough girl. Not exactly what they'd imagined for their only son; she's a little plain, and she doesn't say much when Joseph brings her home. But she seems devoted to Joseph, and he's obviously happy to spend time with her. But he should date lots of girls before he settles down with someone, don't you think? He'd get tired of her soon, both Asher and Leah were pretty sure; and then they'd do their work to find a suitable wife. There's plenty of time.

But today everything changed. As they got ready for bed, silent, each lost in their own thoughts, both Leah and Asher felt their stomachs churning, their minds racing. Joseph had come home earlier in the evening, and they could tell immediately that something was wrong. Luckily he didn't make them wait

very long. “She’s pregnant,” he said, quietly—so quietly that Asher had to ask him to say it again, to speak up. But then Joseph talked louder, and faster. “She’s pregnant. It’s not my baby—it’s not!” he insisted, loudly, because he could see the anger rising in his father’s face. “Well, then, whose is it, pray tell…” Asher had begun sarcastically. Leah kicked him under the table. “I don’t know,” Joseph mumbled. “But we’re going to get married. I want to marry her. I love her.” And although they talked more—lots more—they hadn’t been able to talk him out of it. Their dinner had gone cold. Terrible things had been said, words they already wished they could take back. Where had this stubbornness come from in their son? Finally he just walked out the front door. So now they just laid there, sleepless, waiting to hear that door open and close again. For him to come home to bed, hoping that he’d come in their room, just like the old days, and tell them he was sorry, and that he could see that they were right.

This was not what they had dreamed for this son who held their future in his hands. Hadn’t they given him everything? They had always pictured the perfect wife for him, lots of smart, adorable grandchildren. Maybe Joseph and his family would have the house right next door—they’d buy it for him; so the grandkids could run back and forth as often as they liked. They could have dinner together, and play games and go fishing. What’s wrong with that? Hadn’t they worked hard, done a good job of raising their son to know the difference between right and wrong, so that he could make good decisions for himself? Wasn’t what they wanted just what normal families have?

And now what would happen, they each wondered as they lay stiffly on the bed, wide awake. If Joseph married this girl, his reputation would be ruined. The rest of his life would be stamped with the shame she deserved. And what about the child? There’s no good life for a child born out of wedlock! Everyone would know, immediately. It would be a disaster, a complete disaster. Their son was about to ruin his life, and it seemed like there wasn’t a thing they could do to stop him.

What Asher and Leah waited and hoped for on that night more than 2000 years ago was a God who would swoop down and change everything. The only star they looked for that night was one that would lead them back to the innocence of a happy family, a family with all the *right* possibilities still in front of them. A Messiah who could make Joseph change his mind about marrying this girl Mary. *Just a normal life, please.*

This is the world Jesus—God in a human body—was born into. A world just like ours. A world in which things do not always go well. A family with grandparents who greeted even this holy grandchild with a mix of joy and shame. The light mixed with darkness.

This is what our waiting in Advent is about. This is a season for noticing our need, our emptiness, what we long for, what is not yet right. We wait and we watch until we are ready to admit that even our best plans have not saved us. That there is only one star—of all the flashes in the sky we could follow—that will lead us to what we need most deeply. And what we will find, if we can wait for what is true, is that God comes all the way to find us. In the womb of a son’s pregnant girlfriend. In the very imperfect, and maybe even un-normal, life that is ours.