

A Simple Christmas
Part One: Welcoming Jesus like Mary and Joseph
Matthew 1.18-24 and Luke 1.26-38

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Earlier this week I drove by a house in our community that has a whole yard full of light-up Christmas decorations. You may have seen it.

Included in the collection are:

- a couple of reindeer
- a couple of snowmen
- a couple of angels
- a Santa in a sleigh
- a train full of Christmas presents
- a huge American flag

And somewhere in the middle of all of that
a small nativity scene, showing Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus

Imagine if you were to take someone who had never heard of Christmas before and put them in front of that display and ask, "So, based on this, what would you say Christmas is all about?"

And if you were to take that same person and put them in front of our calendar for the month of December and ask the same question, "So, based on this, what would you say Christmas is all about?", how might they answer?

It is easy for the thing at the heart of it all to get lost in the clutter of other things, isn't it?

That's why this year we're celebrating a **Simple Christmas at Covenant**. Simple meaning uncluttered and undistracted by all the holiday clutter and activities. Simple also meaning focused, keeping our eyes on the person at the center of it all, that little child lying in the manger.

There are five simple ways we're asking you to engage as a church this Christmas season: ***four gatherings at our place and one at yours.***

The ***four gatherings at our place***, of course, are our four Sunday worship services. We want to encourage you to make a commitment to be here for all four of them. Plan to come a bit earlier, and stay a bit later, and give yourself the gift of some time with

your brothers and sisters in the Covenant family, and with our guests and friends from the community who will come worship with us.

We think your investment in those four worship gatherings will help make this a Christmas rich with meaning.

And the ***one gathering at your place?***

We're asking everyone who is part of the Covenant family to open your home to your neighbors sometime during December.

We've been talking for a long time about finding tangible, practical ways to love our literal neighbors: the people who live on either side of us, in front of us and behind us.

This Christmas we are asking the Covenant family to take a next step in loving our neighbors – it might feel like a bit of a risky step – extending hospitality to a neighbor (or several) by opening your home to them. Have them in your home for:

- a classic holiday movie or a meal
- a game night or to decorate Christmas cookies
- a Saturday morning pancake breakfast
- a neighborhood holiday open house.

What will you do? Who will you invite over? If you haven't already done so, would you begin to pray now about who God would have you connect with and how, and then get it on your calendar and start making plans? We can't wait to hear the stories of how God uses those connections you make with your neighbors!

* * *

In our messages during this Advent season we're going to revisit the story of the first Christmas as though we're hearing it for the very first time.

The story is preserved for us in Bible, in the second section, which is called the New Testament. The New Testament is a two thousand year old collection of writings from the early church: historical accounts, letters of encouragement, and so on. Within that collection are four biographies of Jesus that are called *gospels*. Gospel means "good news."

They got their name from the first verse in first of the gospels to be written, the Gospel of Mark, which says:

This is the gospel – this is the Good News – about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. (1.1)

By the way, another term that may not be familiar to you that the church uses a lot around Christmastime: the word *Advent* just means coming or arrival, referring to the coming of Jesus into the world. It's the four week period of time leading up to Christmas.

The story of the first Christmas naturally falls into four parts, so we'll be looking at each of those four parts over these four Sundays in December.

The first part of the story focuses on a young couple named Mary and Joseph.

Our kids just did a great job telling the story of what happened to Mary and Joseph. What I'd like to do now is take us back and have us listen to the story as it comes to us in the gospels.

First we'll hear Mary's side of the story, from Luke's gospel. Then we'll hear Joseph's side from Matthew's gospel.

Luke 1.26-28

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

Luke 1.29-31

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus."

Luke 1.32-33

"He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel [forever](#); his Kingdom will never end!"

Luke 1.34-35

Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin." The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God."

Luke 1.36-37

“What’s more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For the word of God will never fail.”

Luke 1.38

Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.”

And now over to Matthew’s gospel to hear Joseph’s story.

Matthew 1.18-25

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born.

Matthew 1.18-19

His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

Matthew 1.20-21

As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Matthew 1.22-23 (quoting Isaiah 7.14)

All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet:

“Look! The virgin will conceive a child!

She will give birth to a son,
and they will call him Immanuel,
which means ‘God is with us.’”

Matthew 1.24

When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife.

* * *

So what I'd like to do now is just go back through the story and notice some things with you, and ask especially what we can learn from Mary and Joseph's examples of welcoming Jesus into their lives.

Matthew 1.18 gives us a great basic summary statement of what happened.

Matthew 1.18

This is how Jesus the Messiah was born.

The story presents itself as a true story, but wow, when you first hear it, you are instantly hit with all kinds of questions, aren't you?

Angelic beings appearing to human beings in dreams and vision?

A child who fulfills ancient promises who is conceived without any human involvement?

A baby who is human and more than human at the same time?

It sounds more like *Dune* or *The Marvel Universe* than it does a true story.

But this isn't a fable. This account is part of an accurate historical record of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The reliability of the New Testament is far higher than any other ancient writing. We have more copies and earlier copies of the New Testament than we have of any other ancient historical record, by far, making its claims much more reliable historically than anything else we have from the period, including the life of Julius Caesar.

This story happened at a real moment in time, during the reign of Caesar Augustus over the Roman world and of King Herod over the Jewish nation, just over two thousand years ago.

This story happened in a real place, in the town of Nazareth, in Israel, latitude 32 degrees north, longitude 35 degrees east, a tiny hamlet well off the main road in hill country, population about three or four hundred people, somewhere around the size of Americus (423) or Buck Creek (208).

Nazareth Recreated



Here's is a picture of a recreation of the village of Nazareth as archeologists believe it would have looked when this story took place.

So the story happens in a little nowhere place in a remote corner of the country of Israel, but it happens, at a specific place and a specific point in time.

I remember during seminary my dentist saying one of the reasons he couldn't believe in Christianity was because Jesus came to only one place and not to every place – and why there, of all places? Why so specific? Why not here? Why not today? It made no sense to him.

I told him that was the very reason he *should* believe in Christianity, because God who is spirit didn't just remain vague and inaccessible, tucked away in heaven, as good as nowhere because he was present everywhere. Instead, he humbled himself and squeezed himself into a single human being in a single place on earth at a single moment in time so that he could be seen and known by all.

It had to be somewhere, and as soon as it was one place it couldn't be everywhere else at the same time. But that was the miracle of it, not the scandal of it, that the infinite God would reduce himself to a finite span of human flesh in a finite moment in time.

So this is a true story that happens at a real place on our globe at a real moment on our calendar.

And there were real people involved.

A Jewish woman named Mary, and a Jewish man named Joseph, both whom lived in Nazareth. We don't know a lot about either one.

Luke's gospel (1.5) tells us she was probably from the tribe of Levi through her mother's side, because her cousin Elizabeth was from the priestly tribe. And John's gospel tells us she had a sister (19.25).

We don't know much more about Joseph. We know from Luke's gospel that he was a member of the tribe of Judah and a descendant of King David (Luke 3.23-33), and Matthew's gospel tells us he was a *tekton*, a craftsman who worked with his hands, maybe a stone mason, maybe a carpenter, maybe both (Matthew 13.55)

What we know about them both is that they lived in Nazareth (Luke 1.26). They were devout Jewish believers (Luke 2.41). They were engaged to be married (Luke 1.27). They were committed to remaining pure in their physical relationship until after they were married, refraining from sexual involvement with each other and with anyone else (Matthew 1.19, 25).

And what we know from cultural customs of the day is that they were likely pretty young. In ancient Middle Eastern culture, the typical marrying age for women was between 13 and 16, and the typical marrying age for men was 18 to 20. While that falls way outside the norm for our culture, in Israel two thousand years ago, when life expectancy was much shorter and the whole life cycle started and ended sooner than for us, that was normal.

So the stage is set, and now into the lives of these two ordinary human beings come two extraordinary events and two extraordinary beings – all at the initiative of one extraordinary God.

One God who exists eternally in three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit

- God the Father: the creator of all that exists, taking the initiative, conspiring in love to redeem his creation and reconcile them to himself
- Conspiring with God the Son: eternally preexistent, one with the father and co-creator of all that exists, who will take on human form to carry out his father's redemptive mission
- Conspiring with God the Holy Spirit: the third member of the trinity, who works miraculously to empower the redemptive purposes of God, introducing the eternal son of God as a human being into the womb of a young woman named Mary

So God sends a messenger, an angel named Gabriel. Angels are a race of spiritual beings who are servants and messengers of God. They don't have physical bodies but they sometimes take on a visible human form. More on angels next week.

First an angel comes to Mary in a vision (Luke 1.26-29)

Then an angel comes to Joseph in a dream (Matthew 1.20-21)

And what an extraordinary message they have for this young couple. It's a birth announcement! The fact that they are about to have a child is extraordinary enough. But that they are about to have a child like no other.

And now we come to the central person in this story.

What amazing things the angel tells them about this child.

This will be an extraordinary child with extraordinary origins. Conceived not by two human beings but by God himself and placed within Mary's womb.

A child, we are told, who will be both Mary and Joseph's son and the son of the Most High God, having both a human and a divine nature.

They're also told that this child that Mary will carry and Mary and Joseph will raise is a child whose coming has been awaited a long time. This is the long promised and long

awaited Messiah. The name Messiah means the promised king. Their child is the one who will come to fulfill God's promises and purposes for humanity.

His coming has been promised repeatedly across the ages. It has been anticipated by the people of God for more than seven hundred years, going all the way back to the promises of that God spoke through the prophets Isaiah and Micah and Zechariah.

And all of those promises center on two purposes.

Why is the Messiah coming?

He comes as **Rescuer** – he's the promised savior.

The angel tells Joseph he will save God's people from their sins.

And he comes as **Ruler** – he's the promised king.

The angel tells Mary he will reign over God's people forever.

These turn out to be two sides of the same act of redemption.

The sin from which we need to be rescued is the sin of rejecting God's rightful rule over us and living a life of self-rule instead, pushing him off the throne and taking his place. Jesus comes to rescue us from our sinful mutiny and to bring us back into a right relationship with God under his loving rule, living our lives for him.

Now, imagine if you were Mary and Joseph, trying to take in this news.

Their response would have been one of being overwhelmed and in awe. Luke tells us Mary was troubled by the angel's words of greeting and wondered what they might mean.

They must have felt greatly honored, full of joy at having been chosen to have this extraordinary role in God's redemptive purposes.

But their response must also have been one of fear.

Here they are, residents of a town half the size of this church, a teeny town where everybody knows everyone else, and everybody is involved in everybody else's business, and there would be no place of anonymity to hide from the gossip and scrutiny and judgment of the village.

It would not have been difficult for them to guess how disruptive and costly the presence of this child in their life would be.

And so it proved to be, as they traveled to Bethlehem, and then fled to Egypt, and then, after returning to Nazareth, when Jesus began his public ministry, having to give him away to the work that God sent him to do, ending in his sacrificial death.

And yet . . . even in the midst of their confusion and fear, even in the midst of the disruption and cost, both Mary and Joseph, independent of each other, said “yes” to God.

Joseph – in spite of fears he may have had about what Mary may have done, and about how the village would respond, and likely reject them, we’re told in Matthew 1.24

When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife.

And Mary – in spite of fears she likely had about what other people might conclude that she and Joseph had done, and fears of what carrying this child would mean, being ostracized and humiliated by those she loved, we’re told in Luke 1.38:

Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant. May everything you have said about me come true.”

Let me pause the story there – we’ll pick it up again next Sunday – and shift the focus to your story.

What God did in the life of Mary and Joseph – God wants to do a parallel work in us.

He comes to us and announces to us his desire for the Holy Spirit to do a miraculous work in us and for Jesus to be brought to life in us and to live in us. He invites us to receive him, to allow Jesus to be born within, and for us to carry him.

And he invites us to come to a place where we receive Jesus as both savior and king, the one who rescues us from a life of independence from God and to bring us under God’s heavenly rule.

He invites us to say yes to him.

Amid all the clutter of other things, this is the thing that Christmas is all about. Our saying yes to God’s invitation to bring his son to life in us.

What would it look like for you to say yes to God?
What it would it look like for you to welcome this child?

I suspect there are some this morning who God is asking today, for the first time, to give their allegiance to Jesus as King and surrender their lives to him.

If that is your desire, and you have never responded to God's invitation for Jesus to come and take up his residence in you, I invite you to pray this prayer with me this morning

Jesus, I believe you are God with us, and the long promised King. I believe when you died on the cross you died to reconcile me to the Father, to bring me into a love relationship with him. I say yes to you, Lord. I give you my allegiance and surrender control of my life to you.

Prepare room in your heart for him. Receive him as king,

Response

First verse of Joy to the World

Joy to the world, the Lord is come
Let Earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare Him room
And Heaven and nature sing
And Heaven and nature sing
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing

Benediction

Second, the person it is about.

The King of Heaven will be conceived and born as a child on earth

The central person in the story: this child
What we're told about him

From Luke, what the angel tells Mary

A son
Named Jesus
Very great
The Son of the Most High
Will be given the throne
Will reign forever
A human being conceived miraculously
Will be holy
Will be called the Son of God

Luke

³⁰ "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God!

³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ And he will reign over Israel [forever](#); his Kingdom will never end!"

³⁴ Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin."

³⁵ The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.

From Matthew, what the angel tells Joseph

Messiah (promised king)
A human being conceived miraculously
Conceived by the Holy Spirit
Your son and God's son
His name will be Jesus (which means "he saves")
He will save his people from their sins
Rejecting God's claims, living under self-rule Chambers
In fulfillment of God's promises through the prophets
Also called Immanuel, God with us

Matthew

¹⁸ This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement [quietly](#).

²⁰ As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹ And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, ^[b] for he will save his people from their sins.”

Combining these messages

Our response

God wants to do a parallel work in us

He comes to us

He tells us of his desire for Jesus to live in us by a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit

He invites us to receive him

For Jesus be born in us, for us to be reborn in him

Rescued by him

Ruled over by him

A yes to God which means both our great joy and our life's great disruption

Us – in spite of fears of how our lives might change, what God might ask us to do, what it may mean for us in terms of disruption and cost and inconvenience

The movie *Amazing Grace*, William Wilberforce

Have you found God, sir?

Yes, and do you know how inconvenient that is?

What would it look like for you to say yes to God?

What it would it look like for you to welcome this child?

Summary

The story of how God

Sends angels

To speak a promise

A child is coming

He comes to us from outside of our world

The child is God's child

The child will rescue

To Joseph

To Mary

Who respond with welcome

Joseph: yes

Mary: yes

Which results in a life that is

Jesus coming into their lives is

1. deeply satisfying for them, meeting my deepest need

2. filled with godly purpose, for my sake and others

I am part of God's rescue mission

3. Disruptive, costly, I will be misunderstood, I am setting off on a trajectory that is contrary to the flow of the world

How it is costly to me will differ from how it is costly for you

My will is whatever I choose to say yes to.

Welcoming him with *wills* yielded fully to God, marked by a willingness to let God involve us in something much bigger than ourselves, making room for Jesus even when it is disruptive and costly

ANCIENT MANUSCRIPT COMPARISON CHART

Author	Date Written	Earliest Copy	Approximate Time Span between Original and copy	Number of copies
Lucretius	died 55 or 53 B.C.	1100 yrs	2 ----	
Pliny	A.D. 61-113 A.D.	850 yrs	7 ----	
Plato	427-347 B.C.	A.D. 900	1200 yrs	7 ----
Demosthenes	4th Cent. B.C.	A.D. 1100	800 yrs	8 ----
Herodotus	480-425 B.C.	A.D. 900	1300 yrs	8 ----
Suetonius	A.D. 75-160 A.D.	950 yrs	800 yrs	8 ----
Thucydides	460-400 B.C.	A.D. 900	1300 yrs	8 ----
Euripides	480-406 B.C.	A.D. 1100	1300 yrs	9 ----
Aristophanes	450-385 B.C.	A.D. 900	1200 yrs	10 ----
Caesar	100-44 B.C.	A.D. 900	1000 yrs	10 ----
Livy	59 BC-AD 17	???	20 ----	
Tacitus	circa A.D. 100 A.D.	1100 yrs	1000 yrs	20 ----
Aristotle	384-322 B.C.	A.D. 1100	1400 yrs	49 ----
Sophocles	496-406 B.C.	A.D. 1000	1400 yrs	193 ----
Homer (Iliad)	900 B.C.	400 B.C.	500 yrs	643
New Testament	1st Cent. A.D. (A.D. 50-100)	2nd Cent. A.D. (c. A.D. 130 f.)	less than 100 years	5600

NOTES:

- There are thousands more New Testament Greek manuscripts than any other ancient writing.
- The internal consistency of the New Testament documents is about 99.5% textually pure.
- In addition, there are over 19,000 copies in the Syriac, Latin, Coptic, and Aramaic languages. The total supporting New Testament manuscript base is over 24,000.

SOURCE: Christian Apologetics and Resource Ministry - <https://carm.org/manuscript-evidence>