2022 Christmas – IV

**HE WILL SAVE HIS PEOPLE FROM THEIR SINS**

Matthew 1:18-25

Key Verse: 1:21

“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.”

 Merry Christmas! I like to express my appreciation and deep gratitude to those who came from far away. Let us welcome one another by saying ***“Merry Christmas!”*** in different languages. **“*Feliz Navidad!*”** (Spanish). ***“圣诞节快乐!”*** (Shèngdàn jié kuàilè)-Chinese. ***“क्रिसमस की बधाई!”*** (krisamas kee badhaee)-Hindi. ***“メリークリスマス!”*** (Merīkurisumasu)-Japanese. ***“축성탄!”*** - Korean.

 It’s so wonderful to get together to worship after three years of the pandemic and celebrate the birth of the Messiah. People, including even non-believers, celebrate Christmas globally. Why? Well, because it’s just a wonderful time of the year. Don’t you want to celebrate something big and nice with everyone, regardless? Yes! Christmas brings us the special joy of heaven. This morning, I’d like to think about why we should be excited about the coming of the Messiah Jesus.

 We have two Christmas narratives in the Bible; Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 2:1-21. They are different because Luke gives the story of the birth of Jesus from the standpoint of Mary - Jesus’ mother, while Matthew gives it from the perspective of Joseph, Jesus’ legal father. Today, we will concentrate on Matthew’s Christmas narrative.

 Look at verse 18. “This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.” This verse tells us two things: 1) Mary and Joseph were engaged to be married, and 2) before they came together, Mary became pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

 According to ancient Jewish law, an engaged couple is considered virtually married. The engagement could be broken only through a divorce. We are not sure how they came to know each other. Probably, their parents arranged their engagement. Usually, women married at about 13 or 14 years of age, and their husbands were often several years older. The engaged couple would wait for a year before becoming physically united. I am sure that Mary and Joseph were excited about their future with beautiful dreams and hopes, making sure to remain pure and faithful to one another.

 However, an unexpected thing happened to them. What is it? Before they came together, Mary was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.

According to Luke, Mary was informed about her pregnancy through the Holy Spirit by the Angel Gabriel. When Mary first heard the news, she was deeply troubled and asked, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Lk. 1:34) The angel informed her that the Holy Spirit would come on her, and the power of God would rest upon her. (Lk. 1:35) Even though the angel’s announcement sounded beyond human understanding, Mary responded by saying, “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.” (1:38) Mary believed that even though she was a virgin, what the angel told her would happen by the power of God Almighty.

 Many people have trouble accepting virgin birth because they believe conception can only occur when the man’s sperm and the woman’s egg are united. But that’s not the way God created the first man, the first man, Adam, out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Ge. 2:7) What about the first woman? He put Adam into a deep sleep, and while sleeping, he took one of his ribs and made a woman from the rib he had taken (Ge. 2:21-22). How could God do that? It’s because he is Almighty. However, God does not use these two methods any longer. The third way is common: through the man’s sperm and the woman’s egg. This is the way all of us were born. Yet, God can also form a human body through the agency of a woman. And that is the way Jesus received his body- born of a virgin. The virgin birth is more than possible if God can create the heavens and the earth.

 But when some lady says she became pregnant through the Holy Spirit, would you believe her? Maybe not. Would Joseph trust Mary when she told him she became pregnant through the Holy Spirit? Well, I don’t think so. I don’t think Mary expected Joseph would say to her, “*Hallelujah, Amen. Mary, we are so blessed.”* No. Joseph became upset and walked out.

 Look at verse 19. “Because Joseph, her husband, was faithful to the law and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.” At first, Joseph didn’t believe that her pregnancy was through the Holy Spirit. He was leaning toward believing she had been unfaithful to him. The more he thought about it, the more he became confused.

 However, Joseph was a righteous man who honored God and respected other human beings. Now, Joseph had three choices concerning how to proceed: first, he could expose Mary’s pregnancy publicly. In this case, she might have to suffer stoning, even death. If not, she would suffer the shame of public divorce (Deut. 22:23-24). The second option was to divorce her quietly by handing her a written divorce certificate in the presence of two witnesses, possibly her parents (Nu. 5:11-31). The third option was to remain married and not divorce Mary. In that case, he would adopt the child to be his son. I am sure Joseph prayed to the Lord for his guidance.

 What did Joseph choose among the three options? He chose the second option. He didn’t want Mary to go through public disgrace and shame. Instead, he considered divorcing her quietly. It was not a perfect decision, but the best one he could make within the limit of his wisdom and circumstance.

 Look at verses 20. “But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.’” The angel appeared to Joseph because he needed to hear directly from God, so he would not divorce Mary and take her home to be his wife, highlighting that her conception was through the Holy Spirit.

 Why shouldn’t Joseph divorce his wife? It’s because for Jesus to qualify as the Messiah; he had to be the descendant of David. In the previous passage, Matthew 1:1-17. Matthew recorded Jesus’ genealogy. Verse 1 states, “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah as the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Matthew underlined that the identity and legitimacy of Jesus as the Messiah could never be proved unless he was from King David’s family line. So, if Joseph, the son of David, divorced her while she delivered Jesus, he would not be a descendant of David but an illegitimate child. And thus, he would be disqualified from being the Messiah. The virgin birth was not enough; Jesus had to be the descendant of David. So, God intervened so that Joseph did not divorce her but remained married to her and adopted the child, Jesus.

 Look at verse 21. “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.” As the legal father, Joseph was to name the child Jesus. God himself named his son Jesus. And Joseph conducted God’s will by giving the name Jesus to his adopted son. But we see in the Bible that he was often called “Jesus of Nazareth.” We wonder why. It’s because the name ***“Jesus”*** was one of the most common in Israel at that time. It was the Greek version of the Hebrew name ***“Joshua,”*** which means ***“Yahweh (the Lord) Saves”*** or “***Yahweh (the Lord) is Salvation.”***  Probably, many parents named their children Jesus or Joshua because they wanted them to be courageous like the nation’s hero, Joshua. But this name was given to Jesus because he would save his people from their sins.

 Read verse 21 again. “She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.” The phrase, “because he will save his people from their sins,” is Jesus’ primary mission statement. It reveals the character of his Messiahship. The Jews expected and longed for the messiah who could save them from their political opponents. Yet, Jesus would not be a political Messiah but a spiritual messiah who would save us from our sins.

 So, what does “he will save his people from their sins” mean? It’s precise and broad. What does it mean that he will save me from my sins? It’s a simple question but not easy to answer. How would he save us from our sins? He would do so through his sacrificial death, shedding his blood on the cross for the atonement of our sins. It means that all our sins will be forgiven because of his ultimate sacrifice. Yes, by God’s grace, through our faith in Christ Jesus, all our sins are forgiven.

 When a paralyzed man came to Jesus with the help of his friends in Capernaum, Jesus said to him, “Son, your sins are forgiven!” (Mk 2:5) This man didn’t even ask Jesus to forgive his sins, but he not only declared the forgiveness of this man’s sins but also healed the man from physical paralysis. Jesus’ statement offended Jewish religious leaders who thought, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Well, Jesus just demonstrated that he was the of God, the exact representation of God. (Heb. 1:1-4)

 Hebrews 10:13-14 states the efficacy of the blood of Jesus. “Under the old system, the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer could cleanse people’s bodies from ceremonial impurity. Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God. For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins.” (NLT)

 Surely, God’s grace in Christ Jesus is deep and profound. God’s grace in Christ Jesus is the mysterious power for the salvation of everyone who believes. It not only saves us from condemnation for our sins but also continues to reform and transform us into godly images and divine characters, such as love, humility, patience, kindness, goodness, purity, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). It makes us whole and beautiful, just as God wants us to be. The salvation Jesus brings us is not temporary relief but an everlasting life now and forever. Through God’s grace in Christ Jesus, we can live happy lives no matter what.

 How can we experience such great salvation in our lives? Of course, by faith in Christ Jesus. But is it instant and automatic? No. Salvation is a process. In other words, we must follow Jesus as his disciples. In other words, we should not just believe that Jesus is the Messiah. We should live a Christian life. Through our lifestyle as Christian disciples, we can experience God’s great salvation in our lives. Jesus said to his disciples who had just confessed to him as Christ, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mk. 8:34)

 What does it mean that we live as Christian disciples? It means to crucify our sinful nature and selfish ego and be united with Christ Jesus. Apostle Paul said in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

 Crucifying one’s sinful nature and selfish ego is not easy. It requires a lot of struggle and self-discipline. So, even as Christian disciples, we tend not to follow this lifestyle. It’s unpopular even among Christians, the road less traveled, a narrow and challenging way. But we cannot be set from sin unless we choose to follow the course of the cross. Since there are so many false gospels in today’s world, we need sound Christian doctrine. However, that’s not good enough. Even if we agree with fundamental Christian doctrines, we can still walk on the wrong path.

 Why is it so? It’s because following Jesus as his disciples is not necessarily a matter of what kind of church or Christian organization we belong to. Instead, it’s between God and us personally. All things come down to one thing, whether I follow the way of the cross, crucifying our sinful nature and selfish ego and being reformed and transformed into the image of Christ Jesus. When we unite with Christ, we become a new creation and be fully alive. That’s what “he will save his people from their sins” means.

 Look at verses 22-23. “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means ‘God with us’). Matthew saw the birth of Jesus the Messiah as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, stated in Isaiah 7:4, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” The centerpiece of Matthew’s Christmas narrative is **“Immanuel,”** which means **“God with us.”** God became a man, just as Isaiah 9:6 states, “For to us a child is born, to us, a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

 Let me close my sermon. The gospel of Matthew starts with Immanuel – God with us (1:23), and ends with the phrase, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (28:20). Today, in the 21st century what does Immanuel mean to us, including you and me?

 Financial stability is one of the most lingering problems in today’s economy. We need financial stability. But does “God with us” mean that he would provide all of us with financial stability? Does "God with us” mean that he would protect us from unfortunate accidents, diseases, or failures in life? We have gone through the tunnel of three years of the pandemic, which was an unprecedented experience for most of us. Well, even though God does provide what we need and protect us, God also lets us go through suffering and pain. Why? It’s not because God is not with us. It’s because God has a higher purpose in being with us.

 What is God’s higher purpose for each of us? It’s to complete his salvation in us. Romans 8:28-30 states, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” Salvation from our sin is God’s greatest gift for his children. God’s salvation is not cheap or shallow. It’s more than just exempting punishment. It is reshaping us into his beautiful images and lovely characters and building a paradise in us. It’s God’s project in us through Christ Jesus. The world we live in is chaotic and unpredictable. But one thing we know is that God is with us always. And he works for our ultimate good. Therefore, we should be confident that God, who began his work in us, will carry on to completion until the final day. (Phil. 1:6)

 Whatever circumstances we may be in, we should not be afraid or discouraged and lose the joy of salvation. Instead, we should always rejoice, be thankful for his grace, and learn the secret of contentment in all circumstances. We should also share the joy of God’s salvation and forgive others who hurt and sinned against us. Someone said, *“The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.*” We can be strong when we are filled with God’s grace in Christ Jesus. I am not sure what circumstance each of you is in. But one is for sure. God is with you now and forever. Do you believe this? Do you believe this? Do you believe this? Merry Christ and a Happy New Year!