

Luke has a birth narrative, and John begins how he begins his gospel, and Mark begins with John the Baptizer. This reading is exclusive to Matthew, and it is not included in the TLH one-year series. It is in the LW three-year lectionary, appointed for this Sunday. During this week, review the timeline for the events of the nativity, including locations.

The focus of this text is on the manner in which Mary came to be with child. Matthew finds several different ways to tell us that Mary's pregnancy did not come about in the normal manner. Mary was a virgin at the time, she becomes pregnant by means of the Holy Spirit entering into her, and she and Joseph did not engage in sex until later.

Early on the opponents of Jesus and Christianity recognized that the claims of the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection are the two teachings that form the basis of the Christian religion, and that if either of them is undermined, so is the Christian religion. It is those two miraculous events – life and coming back to life – that make Christianity unique.

Already in John (8) we have His fellow Jews talking about Jesus as the “son of Joseph” and saying to Jesus that “we were not born of fornication,” implying that He had been. Matthew (28: 11-15) tells us about the attempted Easter cover-up of the Resurrection, including the hush money offered to the Temple guards to spread a lie.

The irony and tragedy of today's church is that few seminaries teach the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection, and many pastors believe neither of them. Satan must be having a field day watching all these poor, lost sheep coming to church Sunday after Sunday, listening to shepherds who have nothing to say because they don't believe anything themselves.

Particularly pathetic is that many of these sheep are hungry for the Word and go to the place where one would expect to find it, and it's not there, and they don't even realize that it's not there or where to find it. Think about that the next time you get criticized for talking about the legion of false prophets in the pulpit, of whom it is our duty to talk.

When it comes to medical care, it was good enough for previous generations that if the doctor told you to take a pill or take a course of treatment, you took the pill or treatment because the doctor says so and you didn't ask a lot of questions. My generation and those after me want to know why and may even ask a follow-up question, maybe two.

It's like that when it comes to teachings like the Virgin Birth. It was good enough for previous generations to just proclaim the truth and say that it's true because the Bible teaches it, and they are good with that. My generation long ago decided that it would question authority and question it does. But what's the big deal one way or another?

They probably already know that you think the virgin birth is a big deal, and they want to know why you think that and exactly what is the big deal about the Virgin Birth. Is this just one of those turf wars pastors fight? Is my pastor setting up straw men in the chancel just to knock them down? Is he simply and vainly tilting at windmills from the pulpit?

They need to be taught that if Jesus had not been conceived and born in the manner in which He was born, then He would not be the person who He is. If He were not the person who He is, then He could not have done what He did; live a perfect life, die a sacrificial death, and be raised up on the third day, and we would not be saved from hell.

The options are two-fold; either Jesus is fully man and fully God, as the Bible teaches, or He is just another guy like you and me. If He were just another guy like you and me, then He would have been unable to save Self, let alone save the whole world. Only the God-man Jesus is able to do what He did, and the fact that He did is our salvation.

Specifically, if He were just another guy like you and me, He would have given in to temptation like every single person who has ever lived has given into temptation, either early on in the wilderness or later on at Golgotha, or somewhere or everywhere in between. The sacrifice made there had to be perfect, and it is, and it is for us.

Also, if He would have somehow managed to not sin and thereby save Himself, it would us no good. As it is, and as man has been told by God since right after the fall, and as anybody can see from observation, man is in fact been unable to save self. Only God's coming into the world can save us. He has and He has. That's the story of Christmas.

Matthew spends the first 17 verses of his gospel relating the genealogy of Jesus. The way he writes those first verses would have indicated to the reader of His day that Jesus is the Messiah (the Christ, the "anointed.") The rather obvious indication of that is the people who are included in the genealogy, ancestors to Messiah.

Not so obvious to us, but extremely obvious to the first listeners of Matthew, is the three occurrences of the number fourteen – the number of God, the number of Messiah. For Matthew, the genealogy is foundational and preparatory for what comes next. What comes next is him telling us exactly how Mary came to be pregnant with Jesus.

Textual Notes

18. Matthew tells us what he's going to tell us; "Τοῦ δὲ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἡ γένεσις οὕτως ἦν – the birth of Jesus the Christ was happening like this." The first words of that phrase are the definite article Jesus, followed by His title; the Christ. The word "Jesus" means "Savior." So do "Joshua" and "Isaiah." The angel will come and tell us why that name.

We would call “Jesus” His “given name” or His “Christian name,” and that’s what people called Him during His lifetime. The Christ is a Greek word, synonymous with the Hebrew “Messiah.” It’s a title rather than a name, and throughout His lifetime people assigned that title to Him, and some people considered such talk to be blasphemous.

The verb is in the imperfect tense; “was happening;” the process takes about nine months from conception to birth of the child. He continues, “μνηστευθείσης τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ Μαρίας τῷ Ἰωσήφ – the mother of Him, Mary, was engaged to Joseph.” We struggle to find the word for their wedding customs, which are different in some ways from ours.

People break engagements all the time in our culture, and without consequence legal or otherwise. I even know a case where the man literally – and I mean literally – left the woman at the altar and simply moved on with life. In those days, not so much, and a lot of that had to do with the way pairings of marriageable young people took place.

You know that marriages in the time of Jesus were arranged. Father would talk to father, and when a good and acceptable match was discerned, the pairing would begin. People these days who hear of arranged marriages are often horrified that such a thing should ever have taken place, and then tell them that it still *does* take place in some cultures.

Actually, I think it’s safe to say that parents – usually fathers – arranged more marriages than not historically, and given the state of marriage in places like the West, where parents often are the last ones to find out, maybe we should take another look at the old way. Says the man who had absolutely no role in choosing spouses for his children.

In TV shows like *The Big Bang Theory*, where the parents of Raj from India have arranged for him to marry a woman he has never met, and *The Resident*, where Devon – also from India – is engaged to a Hindu woman who meets his family’s approval – he leaves her at the altar, literally – arranged marriage are portrayed in a negative light.

The perception among the horrified is that your father tells you that you have to marry this particular person and you don’t have any say in the matter. In reality, having say or input is a relative thing, and I can’t imagine parents – especially Christian parents – pairing a child with a spouse without any input whatsoever from the children.

In the OT record, Isaac’s courtship of Rebekah plays out though the twenty-fourth chapter of Genesis. Their parents made the match, and then Rebekah journeyed to Isaac, but only after being asked and agreeing to it (58). When she saw Isaac, it was love at first sight, they got married, “and she became his wife, and he loved her” (64ff).

After Jacob did what he did to Esau, causing Esau to want to kill him, Rebekah told him to go to her brother Laban in Haran until things cool off here. Then she told Isaac that she did not want her son to marry “one of these Hittite women” so, Isaac told Jacob to go to his mother’s father to “take as wife from...one of the daughters of Laban” (Gen 28:2)”

When Jacob went to Laban to fetch a wife, it was Jacob who went, not Isaac, and Jacob was famously allowed to choose the attractive Rachel, not her older sister Leah, who had “weak eyes.” That Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah instead is beside the point that the choice of wife was Jacob’s, but Isaac was not uninvolved. Nor was Leah.

The first step of marriage was called **קידושין**, Erusin, kiddushin, which is like our engagement, and it was done separately in a separate ceremony from the wedding. This sealed contract could take place even years before the actual wedding. When the time came for that, the bride went to the groom’s tent or house, and the began living together.

In that time and place, there would have been no secret rendezvous where the two could meet up and start kissing and it escalates into sex, like often happens on TV. Telling us that Mary and Joseph were engaged, but the wedding had not yet taken place, was the first of several ways Matthew tells us of the unusual circumstances of the birth of Jesus.

And if that isn’t clear, then Matthew says that the birth of Jesus happened “**πρὶν ἢ συνελθεῖν αὐτοὺς εὐρέθη ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα** – before their coming together, she was found in womb holding,” which sounds like it may be an idiom or a euphemism, and the meaning is obvious. We also have many idioms and euphemisms for pregnancy.

The word “coming together” is a general word meaning just that, a gathering together of people or in this case just two people. The location of the child is stated to be the womb of Mary. Rumors and denials flew early and often, and you wonder if one of them was that Mary’s baby – she had never actually been pregnant, but another woman bore Jesus.

How did such a thing happen? She was pregnant “**ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου** – from the Holy Spirit.” This preposition followed by a noun in the genitive case indicates motion out of. Know your audience before you say this, and you may well think it expedient to go with euphemism; the life-giving Spirit acts like the sperm from the Father, and that’s okay.

The Early Church decided early that it was appropriate for Mary to be called the Mother of God, and so she was. No hard evidence, but I suspect the Lutherans in America threw the term out – or at least avoided it – as “catholic sounding,” but it’s making a comeback. My people don’t even bat an eye anymore when I talk about Mary like that.

19. Joseph is described like this; “**Ἰωσήφ δὲ ὁ ἀνὴρ αὐτῆς, δίκαιος ὢν** – Joseph, the husband of her, was righteous.” While Mary is often called the Mother of Jesus, never is Joseph referred to as his father. Variant readings of Luke 2:33 have “his father” spoken of, as well as His mother, while other texts call him “Joseph.”

Looking at the manuscript evidence, I’m going to call it a draw, but I have a hard time thinking that Luke, who clearly doesn’t think Joseph is the father of Jesus, and who says

that he has done his homework, and that would have included reading Matthew, and it's not a small point, would have called Joseph the "father" of Jesus.

The KJV and most of its direct descendants call the man "Joseph," and as might be expected, the later translations favor "father." It is my observation that the KJV was not driven by a theological agenda, but most modern translations very much are. It's why my RSV famously and wrongly call Mary "a young woman" in Isaiah 7:14, not "virgin."

In Luke 2:33, the virgin birth deniers want the Bible to say what their theology teaches; that Jesus had a human father, and that He was therefore just a man like you and me; that He was not and is not God. You wonder if the variant reading came from an early denier (early and often) or perhaps trying to soften Christian theology for the usual reasons.

Joseph is not that, but Joseph is referred to as "righteous," which I take to mean that He was a Christian, because that's what the Bible means by that, and he was. We know that because he had a children's aspirin named after him, and before that, Joseph was made a Saint. His Feast Day is March 19, and LSB calls him "St. Joseph, Guardian of Jesus."

And he acted like a Christian, beginning soon. Joseph was "μὴ θέλων αὐτὴν δειγματίσαι – not willing to publicly expose her." The verb "δειγματίζω" is used in the NT only here and in Colossians 2:15, where the cross is spoken of as something for everybody to see, and it has connotations of somebody in Mary's condition being made an example of.

We need look no further than the eighth chapter of John to see what might very well happen to an unmarried woman with a bun in the oven in that time and place. That may require some explaining in this time and place; far from getting you stoned or even locked up or even fined, being knocked up in this time and place is NBD.

Levitical law did indeed call for the stoning of both the man and the woman caught in adultery. We still need to look no further than the eighth chapter of John to see that that particular law was applied somewhat selectively – at least in that case; they were going to stone the woman, but the adulterous man is nowhere to be found, or so it seems.

Joseph makes the decision to not cause Mary to be killed in this manner before the visit of the angel; before he gets the SITREP from the angel. Joseph isn't going to publicly make an example of Mary, but he's going to quietly and in private tell his father that he can't marry Mary, and if his father asks him why, Joseph will probably tell him.

But wait!

20. Matthew says of Joseph that "ταῦτα δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐνθυμηθέντος – he pondered these things." It means that when he found out that Mary was with child, he thought it through. Perhaps he thought to himself that Mary didn't seem like that kind of a girl, or that there must be some explanation; a false pregnancy or false pregnancy test perhaps.

I have known several men who have married women who were carrying another man's child, that's generally not a good idea, and probably that was not an option considered in Joseph's thinking. KJV has the verb "ἐνθυμέομαι" as "thought," and that's good. The word occurs two other places in the NT, later in Matthew (9:4), and in Acts 10:19.

The verb means thinking, but more specifically very serious thinking. In the later Matthew appearance, Jesus accuses religious leaders of "thinking evil" in their hearts right after they accuse Him of blasphemy for pronouncing the Absolution. In Acts, Peter is trying to get his head around that vision of unclean animals in the net.

But wait! There's more; "ἰδοὺ ἄγγελος Κυρίου κατ' ὄναρ ἐφάνη αὐτῷ - behold, an angel (messenger) of the Lord appeared to him in a dream." The focus of "ἄγγελος" is on the message delivered, not on the appearance of the message deliverer. Often, when an angel appears, the first thing the angel says it to "stop being afraid" or some such thing.

The verb generally means that the thing appearing can be physically seen with the eyes, but sometimes it means "to appear in the mind" (biblehub.com), as seems to be the case here. We note that nobody has to tell Joseph to stop being afraid, and it goes without saying that this is a miraculous appearing with news of a very unusual, miraculous thing.

It says to him, "ὡσὶφ υἱὸς Δαυεὶδ, μὴ φοβηθῇς παραλαβεῖν Μαρίαν τὴν γυναῖκά σου – Joseph, Son of David, you should not fear to receive Mary your wife." While Joseph was thinking, he was also fearing. There were a lot of things that he could have feared; that it is true that Mary was unfaithful, that she would be found out and stoned, and the like.

Now this bombshell to explain why Joseph should not fear; "τὸ γὰρ ἐν αὐτῇ γεννηθὲν ἐκ Πνεύματος ἑστὶν Ἁγίου – because in her has been conceived from a Spirit that is Holy." The human life has begun, and the translations that have the conception by "the Holy Spirit" are correct. It's the same kind of language used earlier and noted here.

21. But wait! There's more; "τέξεται δὲ υἱὸν καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν – she will bear a son, and you will call His name 'Jesus.'" Joseph has been called the "Son of David" – in the Messianic line, and it is Joseph who will name his wife's son. Why Joseph? If not Joseph, then who would have done that? It was the father's job.

His proper name will be "Jesus," like my brother-in-law Jesus – we call him "Jesse," and like I am called "Steven" or "Steve," but not by laymen not related to me. The reason for that name; because that is just what this Son of Mary will do; "αὐτὸς γὰρ σώσει τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν – for He will save His people from their sins."

The verb is in the future tense; something that has not yet happened, but it will happen later, and it does. The noun "λαὸς" in the phrase "His people" is commonly used to refer to Israel and later to the Jews. At this point, the nativity is very much an in-house thing involving the Jewish people. Later, tramps like us Gentiles are invited to come on board.

The concept of people being saved from their sins is a very big deal, a real game changer. We are either saved or we are not. Without the forgiveness of sins, because of our sins, all we can look forward is a life of suffering and then eternal death. With the forgiveness of sins, we can look forward to a life of suffering and then eternal life and bliss.

Luther talks like that in the Small Catechism, asking; “What is the benefit of this eating and drinking?” and answering; “that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.” They go together hand in glove.

22. Writing primarily to the Jews in Damascus, to whom such things were important, Matthew often quotes from the OT, and often his quotes are specific OT prophecies, like here. Isaiah (7:14) records how unbelieving King Ahaz refused a sign, so “The Lord” said that He would give a sign, “a virgin will conceive.” This is the fulfillment of that.

23. The quote from Isaiah, “ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἔξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν – the virgin will hold in the womb and bear a son.” Both the Hebrew and the Greek words are words for a male or female who have not yet had sexual relations. Both languages have a word for “young woman,” not used. Matthew again tells us of the nature of the birth of Jesus.

It's a miraculous thing, and at this point, the preacher will want to say that; the birth of Jesus happened the way that it happened. Because so many preachers deny the virgin birth, and because people often believe what the pastor says, you may then want to delve into the why of the virgin birth; why it's important that we understand whom Jesus is.

We begin with the problematic idea that, in at least some cases, the Bible cannot be believed, the most slippery of all slippery slopes. If you can't believe one part of the book, then who is to say that you should believe the other parts. As a matter of fact, that's exactly where a lot of western Christians find themselves; they doubt it all.

The larger theological issue is that if Jesus is not who the Bible says He is, then He has no ability to save Himself, let alone save us. It is because Jesus is God that He is able to resist every temptation and remain perfect, and it is because He is God that His death on the cross is able to atone for the sins of all people of all times and places.

Remove the virgin birth, and you remove Jesus as God, and He becomes just another guy, no different from the rest of us, with no ability to save anybody. If you want to see what that looks like, just look at the LDS or JW or even Islam, all of whom like Jesus as a person and look to Him for moral guidance, none of whom regard Him as God.

Yet again, Matthew tells us Whom Jesus is by calling Him “Immanuel.” That very familiar word is actually three Hebrew words, strung together in the manner of the Germans, and Matthew tells us what those three words mean; God with us. The promise made to Adam and Eve long ago has now been kept in the person of Jesus.

24. Joseph woke up from his sleep, and he did what the angel said to do, “καὶ παρέλαβεν τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ - and he received his wife.” The verb implies that he had earlier not received – rejected – her, and Matthew calls Mary “his wife.” The verb is also one more way of saying that Joseph did not have sex with Mary until after she conceived Jesus.

25. And if you didn’t catch that, and just to be on the safe side, they did not have sex after the wedding, after they started living together, “καὶ οὐκ ἐγίνωσκεν αὐτὴν ἕως οὗ ἔτεκεν υἱόν – and he did not know her until she bore a son,” which means that he did “know” her after Jesus was born, and to think otherwise corrupts the biblical view of marriage.

In the same way that it’s not necessary for John B to be perfect, it’s not necessary for Mary to remain a virgin. The clear biblical record of Jesus having brothers and sisters is a clear indication that she did not. I’m not sure from whence the current fascination with the perpetual virginity – she remained virgin – of Mary comes among certain Lutherans.

Oh, I just remembered. It’s another of the errors that crept into the Church prior to and a cause for the Lutheran Reformation. Mary became elevated, and her elevation continues in the Roman Church. The church in Minocqua, WI *Our Lady, Queen of the Universe* is not a Lutheran church, nor do the Lutherans speculate about her as “co-redemptrix.”

Just because Luther and most of the other reformers accepted that teaching does not bind us to, and we aren’t, and we shouldn’t. Martin Luther isn’t the Bible, and neither are the Smalcald Articles. The father named the child, “καὶ ἐκάλεσεν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν – and he called His name Jesus,” and He is the reason for the season.

Law/Gospel

Not Here/Now Here – For many years, from the time of Adam and Eve, the People of God had been waiting for “Immanuel,” for God to be with them. The time of waiting and uncertainty is over, for the Savior is now here, come to save from sin.

Man’s Futility/God’s Ability – The OT is indeed a “schoolmaster,” as Paul says, and if the OT teaches us one thing, it teaches us that nobody is perfect. All people, even the good ones, sin. Man is utterly unable to save self. His ability to even believe is “a gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). God, who alone is able to save us, does just that. Out of His love for His fallen creation, He comes into the world and does what needs to be done.

All Humans/Jesus – Compare and contrast some of the OT saints, and modern man with Jesus. That Jesus is perfect is good news because His perfection is counted as our perfection by faith, “a gift of God.”

Sermon Titles

God With Us

The Birth of Jesus Took Place in This Way

Mary, Joseph, and Jesus

What Just Happened?

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
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Grand Mound, Iowa