

Matthew 1:18-25 – Advent 4– In Thy Dark Streets – December 21, 2025

+In Nomine Iesu+

Today is the shortest day of the year. It is the winter solstice. The sun sets at 4:33 pm today. And although our weather is all over the place this year—we *generally* see a lot of clouds and darkness in December. It is interesting that the church talks so much about light in this season. It is interesting that Jesus is born at a time of cold and darkness. And as we know, there are different kinds of darkness.

I always feel like we are cheating in year A of the Three-Year Lectionary on the Fourth Sunday in Advent. This is our year for St. Matthew's Gospel. And the church gives us the Nativity of Christ in Matthew 1 this year. We are getting a little ahead of ourselves—with a little Christmas in Advent.

But I don't mind. In this sense, we extend the Christmas season beyond the 12 days. We receive just a little extra light from Matthew's witness to the Incarnation and Nativity of Our Lord.

A not so famous 20th Century German Theologian—part of the resistance movement within Germany during World War II—Friedrich von Bodelschwingh, said it this way, “Advent and Christmas are like a keyhole through which a light from home falls on our dark path on earth.” And I agree.

Matthew's Gospel begins with a genealogy. It is much more manageable than what we find in 1 Chronicles, for example. In fact—as far as genealogies go—this one is the most exciting that we find in Scripture.

It leads us from Abraham to David to Babylon to Joseph—from the tribe of Judah—all the way to Jesus in sets of fourteen names. In fact, Matthew calls his own Gospel, “the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ.” And it is the beginning of a new season in the whole of human history.

But then, Matthew goes right to the Nativity. We don't get the kind of detail you find with Luke. We don't hear about Zechariah and Elizabeth—and their child, John. We don't have the Magnificat. We don't have the Holy Family traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Even the shepherds are not mentioned.

Instead, we start with trouble. We know from Luke, that Mary—after the Annunciation and Incarnation—goes and stays with Elizabeth. Mary knows what is going on. The Angel Gabriel tells her, “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.” Matthew merely notes that, “She was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.” This is a lot to take in for her.

Perhaps this trip allows her to ponder what God is doing in her—and in the world. It's the kind of think that Mary does. Perhaps it allows her to distance herself from the gossip and rumors that will develop if she stays in Nazareth. And of course, it gives her some distance from Joseph. How would he respond? Would he ever believe her? It will look to him—and to all the world—like she has been unfaithful.

Eventually, she does return. And the problem is obvious. You can only hide a pregnancy so long. These must have been dark and difficult days for Mary. The crowds would have been petty. There were whispers and rumors.

And for Joseph too. This is not a problem that he anticipated. Imagine the heartbreak he experienced. His betrothed is pregnant—and he is not the father. Sexual immorality is one of the most divisive kinds of sin.

But I do appreciate his response—even before he finds out the truth. He has been betrayed—or so he must think. And think about how we usually react to betrayal. Think about the Carrie Underwood song—not about Jesus taking the wheel—but the one she sings about her cheating boyfriend. She breaks out the headlights of his way too expensive truck with a baseball bat. She carves her name into the seats. And we all cheer her response.

But not Joseph. He deals with everything quietly. The penalty for adultery—which is what seems to be going on—can be death—after the baby comes, of course. The Hebrews took such things seriously—at least at this point in their history.

But Joseph is compassionate. He takes the weight of the situation upon himself. He suffers in silence. He is unwilling to even shame Mary. He does what is best for her—even in this dark situation. There is a lot for us to learn from this just man. We would complain and grumble and hold grudges for far less.

I am reminded of what Paul says in Philippians 2, “Do everything without complaining or arguing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”

This is Joseph. And we would do well to follow his example when things don’t go our way—in our families, our churches, the community. We would do well to reject the pettiness and gossip of the crowds. Joseph’s path is even a path of light—as Paul suggests. It is wisdom and character. Even when we are wronged—we are to protect those that God has placed in our lives—including their reputations.

Now, of course, God is going to make all of this right. And the solution begins with an angel. And we associate angels with light. When the angel appeared to the shepherds in Luke 2, Luke tells us, “The glory of the Lord *shone* around them.” The angel who appears to Joseph is not named. Gabriel is the angel who announces both the conception of John the Baptist and the conception of Jesus to Mary. And for these reasons, he might be the one in our Gospel reading.

Here, the angel dramatically announces to Joseph what he needs to know—what we need to know. The conception of this Child is by agency of the Holy Spirit—not from Joseph—which he knows, obviously—or from any other man. Mary has not been unfaithful. She is the Blessed Virgin Mary.

And so, Joseph is to take Mary as his wife. And Joseph has been given responsibilities by God. One specific responsibility is to give this Divine Child a specific name. His name is *Joshua*—or really a shortened form of Joshua—*Yeshua*—in Hebrew. Our form comes through Greek—*Iesous*—Jesus.

The name has meaning. It includes the divine name of God from the Old Testament—*Yahweh*. And the Hebrew word for *salvation*. *Jesus* means—*Yahweh saves*. Jesus comes to restore the kingdom of God. He comes to save His people from sin and death. He comes to “give his life as a ransom for many.” And so, this name is packed with meaning.

And Matthew explains this as a fulfillment of our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Isaiah today. God was giving through Isaiah, a prophecy of a future Messiah that was fulfilled in the conception and birth of Jesus.

But both Isaiah and Matthew are clear. This conception is miraculous. There has never been one like it. There will never be another one like it again. Jesus is born of the Blessed Virgin Mary. And this means that He is *Immanuel*. And Matthew even tells us what this Hebrew name means. It means that Jesus is *God with us*. Perhaps we should see this as a title—or even a description of Jesus’ identity.

These are highly charged names. They reveal so much. The name Jesus specifies what He does—God saves. Immanuel specifies who He is—God with us. Matthew even ends His Gospel with such good news. Here Jesus says, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” These are things to celebrate on these cold and dark days.

And we can learn from Joseph and Mary—especially as we really understand what this birth means. Joseph and Mary’s life was not easy. We know they lived in relative poverty. We know Joseph dies while Jesus is still a young man. There is a good chance that no one but Zechariah and Elizabeth—and John the Baptist—believed their story—at least for many years. They lived with the stigma of immorality and shame.

And of course, they lived with the weight of what would happen with Jesus. I am thinking about the words of Luke 2, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

But it was enough that they knew the truth. And really, who cares about the whispers, the gossip, the rejection. In the Virgin Birth—God was working His plan to save the world—right there in their midst. They can see God’s glory—His light—in what God has begun in the coming of Jesus. They even played a little part in it.

Mary is the God-Bearer—the Mother of God. She is blessed by God in ways no one else has ever experienced. And Joseph is the Guardian and he is righteous and devout—present for the young life of Jesus—and what an honor that was.

They understand Jesus’ divine nature because of His birth. They recognize He is the One Person in whom is united both full deity and full humanity. He is the first since Adam and Eve to have no inherited sin—no original sin. And they experience the very beginning the redemption that God will work in Jesus Christ.

In Luke, Mary responds with worship, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” In Matthew, Joseph responds with obedience, “he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.”

Today, we live in another stage of redemptive history. But even still, this day that we call *Christmas* is filled with prophetic anticipation. And we still affirm—not only the

Virgin Birth as historical fact—but we affirm what it means. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, the Son of David, the Son of God. And He will save His people from their sins.

Now, this story is still filled with cultural controversy. This was a miraculous birth—a Virgin Birth—and one that is very hard to explain. But Mary knew all of this from her own experiences as well as the angelic announcement. Joseph needed a little help in that regard, but he believed the angelic word. The rest of the world struggled with what to think about this birth. They still do.

But for us, this moment is filled with divine intervention. It is filled with the Light of God’s Christ. Sure, this is the story of a young man and a young woman who are yielded to the purposes of God for their lives. It is hard to find more faithful people in the Holy Scriptures than Mary and Joseph.

But this is primarily an account of God’s actions. And we should take notice. God sends His angels. But more importantly, He sends His Son. And He is God with us. He is the One who makes God known to us. He is the One who brings salvation. It all begins with this infant Child born in Bethlehem. And we are called to reckon with Him.

So today, we looked at the Nativity story—the genesis—the origin of Jesus Christ—with a little more depth. I hope you can see that as we gather this week for services, we mark the incarnation and the Nativity of Christ. This isn’t just about presents and dinner. It is about the arrival of the true Son of God in the frail flesh of our humanity—the True Light has come into the world. And so, we respond in solidarity with Mary and Joseph.

In the church, we are telling the story of God taking on our humanity to rescue us from ourselves, from sin, and even from His just judgment. And the lyrics apply to Clinton, just as they apply to Bethlehem, “Yet in thy dark streets shineth; The everlasting Light; The hopes and fears of all the years; Are met in Thee tonight.”

And so, we rest in the same sign that God gave through the Prophet Isaiah. Matthew thinks this is a big deal and so should we, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+