A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*Made for This*

Matthew 1

December 22, 2019

Today is the fourth Sunday in the season of Advent, which means that in the church’s liturgical rhythm, we are still waiting. We are still in the dark, and in the natural cycles of the year, we’re now in winter. But even the smallest child knows what all of this really means: The Big Day is almost here. On this fourth Sunday of Advent we celebrate the coming of Christ . . .very soon. It is still night, but the dawn’s light is beginning to come over the distant horizon promising that the night is soon over and the day will soon come. We receive communion today and every time we do, we remember that Christ lived, died, and is resurrected. Today, especially, we are reminded that he was also born.

Jesus was born. He was born to Mary and Joseph, tucked away in Bethlehem. He was born to Israel, inheritor of the legacy of her kings. He was born to all the world, to all creation. Sometimes good people worry that we make too much of Christmas. I say, we can’t possibly make enough of it.

Matthew’s gospel tells us the story of his birth through the remarkable experience of Joseph. Joseph was betrothed to Mary who was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Considering what to do about this situation, Joseph had a dream in which an angel appeared to him, assuring him of the wonderful mystery of the child, saying, “Joseph, son of David, the child in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you shall call him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

And thus Jesus was born. The message to Joseph and to gospel readers is that Jesus’ birth, and his life, death, and resurrection, are to save people from their sins. His name testifies to his vocation: Jesus . . Yeshua . . .Yahweh saves. Jesus came to save sinners. This is one of the repeated and emphasized messages in the New Testament, the great promise that we who are sinners find our salvation in him. Paul wrote somewhere, “God shows his love for us all in this, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” And somewhere else he writes, “Jesus came to save sinners, and I am chief among them.” Jesus says, “For God so loved the world, he gave his only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Even though this is good news for us, it seems like a heavy load to put on a newborn baby, or even one yet to be born, yet Matthew is not shy to make this claim early and to make it central. It is, in fact, good news. It is the gospel. Jesus came to save us from our sin.

Yet, even in Matthew’s gospel which speaks of this right here at the beginning, there is something more. Our salvation from our sins is one part of the grand, historic, cosmic story of the incarnation. Human sin is at the center, but it is not the beginning and not the end of the story.

It’s helpful to see that the story of the angel, Joseph, and Mary in Matthew 1.18 is already the third incarnation account in Matthew’s gospel. There are three accounts of the incarnation already in the first chapter of Matthew. It’s a ring of concentric circles each of which widens the significance of the incarnation. Moving upstream from Joseph, the angel, and Mary, we see Jesus was born, but he didn’t come from nowhere.

Just before the abrupt shift of verse 18, “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way,” Matthew’s gospel provides an extensive genealogy of the family of Jesus. From Abraham to Joseph, Matthew lays out the “begats” of the family tree. Indoingso, he organizes the history in three sets of 14 generations. Matthew thinks this is important, even though it leaves us puzzled exactly why it’s important, because here and there he leaves out people named in the Old Testament. He includes some but not others, so it’s not a comprehensive ancestry report. Some of those who he does include are unlikely characters in a story of redemption: a foreigner, a harlot, a victim, good kings and those not so good either. It reads a bit like an island of misfit ancestors. From Abraham to David, from David to the deportation to Babylon, and from Babylon to Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born who is called Christ.

This is the big history of Jesus’ birth. Matthew begins this by emphasizing two names in particular: Jesus is the son of David and the son of Abraham. In being the son of David, Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies like the one in Isaiah that says a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and call him Emmanuel. He is the fulfillment of the promise that someone from David’s lineage will rise up as the new king. In being the son of David, Jesus is the new King of Israel. In being the son of Abraham, he is a member of the wider human race. Sons of Abraham branched into all the world, so to be a son of Abraham, means to be in the family devoted to one God. But it is something more. Isaac was a son of Abraham, even when Abraham himself led him to the mountain to die. Soberly, we understand as readers that to be son of Abraham to be one who is sacrificed. Abraham’s hand was stayed before he slay Isaac. No hand will be stayed who drives nails into Jesus’ hands and feet. So to be son of David and Abraham is to be King of the Jews who will be killed. Matthew tells us this right from the start.

This story of Jesus’s birth reminds us where he comes from and what is in store for him. He is the son of Kings, misfits, and sinners. He is the embodiment of humanity’s best intentions and our greatest failings. He is one of us even while being greater and other than us. In laying out the generations as he has, Matthew gives a picture of Jesus as the fulfillment of a story that has been written in human lives over the centuries. Joseph and Mary’s place in the story is the culmination of a divine plan that’s been unfolding for a long, long time. Their son is the king of and son of history.

This history is the second story Matthew tells about Jesus. The third story is the story of the Holy Family wrestling through this thing that has happened to them. Going back in Chapter 1, the second and wider story is of the Holy People through the ages wrestling with their God and their purpose throughout the generations. What incarnation story could be grander than that? And yet there is yet one more widening. It is the widest of all, all creation and the heart of God made known.

The first and grandest account of the incarnation is told in the first words of the gospel. The first two words of Mathew 1.1 which are the first two words in the New Testament are *biblos* *genesis*. Sometimes translated flatly as the book of the geneaology, But in Greek *biblios* *genesis* is the book of the beginning, the book of the genesis of Jesus Christ. We don’t miss the connection to the first line of the first book of the Torah. John’s gospel begins similarly, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” In two words, Matthew is widening our field of view in just the same way. The coming of Jesus is the story of the purpose of all Creation.

We see through Matthew’s gospel and indeed the witness of all the New Testament that “the acts of creation and incarnation were not separate but part of one divine plan. So rather than the incarnation being a plan b to rescue humanity after the fall, it is the whole purpose of creation. Christ is the masterpiece of love in the midst of a creation designed for love, rather than a divine plumber come to fix the mess of original sin.”[[1]](#footnote-0) His coming to save sinners is his coming to save us from our distance and blindness to the image of God within us and the loss of our identity as creatures in community with one another and God and all creation made in, through, by, and for divine love.

The Bible’s story is the gospel’s first story, the cosmic story the *biblos genesis* of creation and its maker: Creation and incarnation bound together in one great epic of the love of God that underlies all existence. So now we begin to see the whole picture, at least see as well as we can peer into the great mystery:

Mary’s body is the womb that receives her Lord.

Israel’s story is the village that receives her King.

Creation itself is the cradle that receives her Creator.

Mary is sometimes called the Queen of the World, and with good reason. She embodies not just human potential for humble receptivity though she is that. Mary is also the sign of all creation. In the person of the Virgin, the fallen, broken, world, far from its virgin Edenic state, is made able to receive our Savior, our King, our Maker. Christmas usually magnifies the loveliness of the Mary and Joseph story, and it should. But telescope out from there and see the bigger picture.

In the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph, we find our way to open our hearts to receive him.

In the story of Israel, we find our story redeemed, our past and our future in the hands of God in whom all things work for good.

In the story of creation, we find all things made new in Him through whom God reconciles all to himself whether on earth or in heaven. Sometimes people ask, usually late night in a dorm room somewhere, “Why is there anything instead of nothing?” It’s actually a great question. Here at Christmas, the answer comes to us. The purpose of creation IS the incarnation.

The incarnation is the completion of creation, its purpose, and its yearning. For all creation has been groaning as in childbirth for the son of God to be revealed, and for all things to be made new. Jesus was born, and when he was, the world met her maker.

Everything that is was made for this.

Mommies and Daddies and Mary and Joseph and Angels and sheep, stars and music.

Everything that is was made for this.

Rain and soil and trees cut into manger-sized boards, grain and grapes, made into bread and wine, cotton and flax spun into swaddling cloths.

Everything that is was made for this.

Faith and hope and love.

Everything that is was made for this.

And so were you.

Your hands..

your voice...

your mind...

your feet...

your true self...

You were made for this.

Your hurts and hopes,

your strengths and your weaknesses,

your heart and soul,

your yesterdays, todays, and tomorrow.

You were made for this--made to receive the Incarnate Lord of all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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1. Yates, Phillippe, “The Primacy of Christ in John Duns Scotus: An Assessment,” *Faith Magazine* Jan-Feb 2008. <https://www.faith.org.uk/article/january-february-2008-the-primacy-of-christ-in-john-duns-scotus-an-assessment> [↑](#footnote-ref-0)