

## SERMON NOTES

Christmas and Epiphany

Synaxis Gospel  
Matthew 1:18-25

### THE BIRTH AND BAPTISM OF THE SAVIOR

#### INTRODUCTION

Matthew devotes the first two chapters of his Gospel to the genealogy and birth of Jesus Christ. The genealogy is recorded in chapter 1 verses 1-16 and traces His human lineage from Abraham through David, the King, and his successor on the throne, Solomon. The genealogy continues through King Solomon's direct descendants on the throne of Judah until the Babylonian captivity. Thereafter, it traces the legitimate claimants to the throne down to Joseph, the husband of Mary. This listing was important to Matthew because it established that Jesus had a legitimate right to the throne of David through his adoption by Joseph.<sup>1</sup>

With verse 18 of his first chapter, Matthew began the account of Joseph's engagement to Mary, the mother of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> It reads as follows:

#### SYNAXIS READING

Matthew 1:18-25

*Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.*

*And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly.*

*But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.*

*And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins."*

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<sup>1</sup> This would also indicate strongly that Joseph had no prior sons who would be Joseph's rightful successor as claimant to the throne.

<sup>2</sup> Mary's story is found in Luke 1:26-56; 2:1-39.

*Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD, AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL, which translated means, 'God with us.' "*

*And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took her as his wife, and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.*

## NOTES

### And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man,

When a couple were engaged to be married, all the arrangements with the families were made; and the woman was considered his wife and he her husband. However, there was a waiting period in which the woman continued to live with her own family. The groom/husband used the time to prepare a home for her. When the home was ready, he would surprise her and carry her off. This is when the marriage was actually consummated.

It was during the waiting period that Joseph realized that Mary was pregnant and so thought the worst. He was a moral and upright man and this pregnancy would reflect on his own character for people might think that he had violated the waiting period.

If he had been the father of the child, he could have gone ahead with the marriage; under the law he would have been required to do so and then he would not be allowed to divorce her in the future.<sup>3</sup>

### and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly.

Joseph knew that he was not the father of the child. Under the law, if an engaged girl were raped in the city, she would be considered an adulteress and would be stoned because she could have called for help. However if she had been raped in the fields, she would be considered innocent for it would be assumed that she had called out and no one heard her. In that case she would not be stoned.<sup>4</sup>

Joseph was a kind man and wanted her treated as one who had been raped in the fields. However, for him she was now defiled and the law allowed him to divorce her. For her sake he wanted the divorce to be done secretly. How this could have been accomplished is a puzzle for it must have been public knowledge that they were engaged.

### But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream,

An angel of the LORD is a significant term. In the Old Testament, the term "an/the Angel of the

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 22:29. This passage applies to an unengaged maiden but it would seem to cover a girl such as Mary if her fiancé were the father of her child.

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 22:22-27.

LORD” occurs 56 times.<sup>5</sup> He never appears in a dream in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament, the term “an angel of the LORD” occurs 12 times and sometimes should probably be identified with the Angel of the LORD of the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup> In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, nowhere does the angel appear to someone in a dream, except to Joseph and to the “magi from the east”<sup>7</sup> who came to worship the newborn King. The angel appears in a dream to Joseph 3 times<sup>8</sup> and to the magi once.<sup>9</sup>

saying, “Joseph, son of David,

Son of David refers to the fact that Joseph was the direct descendant of King David.

do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife;

“Do not be afraid” is a translation of φοβηθής which can have the meaning “be terrified of” but here has the nuance of “to shrink back” from doing something.

Joseph was shrinking back from taking a wife who he thought had been defiled by another man. The Angel of the LORD commands Joseph to stop “shrinking back.”

for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.

“For” introduces the reason why Joseph should go ahead with the marriage.

Though Mary was pregnant, there was no human agent responsible for her condition. She was undefiled; in fact the One conceived in her womb was of the Holy Spirit. Compare Luke 1:35 which states “the power of the Most High will overshadow” Mary. That Power performed the miracle.

And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus,

Jesus, Ἰησοῦς, is the Greek form of the Hebrew name יהושע, or Joshua. The Hebrew name is associated with the verb meaning “to save” and could be translated “the LORD is salvation.” Joseph is commanded to give the Child this significant name.

for it is He who will save His people from their sins.”

“Save His people” is a most significant theological term. In the Old Testament there was but one Savior, God Himself.<sup>10</sup> He alone would save. Any other ‘savior’ was simply someone God raised up for a specific saving purpose related to physical oppression and who He endued with His powerful Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

This Savior, born to Mary, saves from sin, a spiritual oppression from which only God Himself can save. This Child then is GOD, the only Savior. The New Testament continues this use of the term with reference to God/Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In the appearances in the Old Testament, it is difficult to determine if it is not the LORD Himself Who is appearing as the Angel for He speaks as if He were the LORD and sometimes those who see Him believe they have seen the LORD.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 252.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 2:1

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 1:20; 2:13, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 2:12.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Samuel 22:3; 2 Kings 13:5; Psalm 106:21; Isaiah 19:20; 43:4, 11; 45:15, 21; 49:26; 60:16; 63:8; Jeremiah 14:8; Hosea 13:4. Even those times that God used a human deliverer (as in the book of Judges) it was recognized that it was God Who was the actual Savior.

<sup>11</sup> For example, the deliverers in the Book of Judges.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 2:11; John 4:42; Acts 5:31; 1 Timothy 4:10; 2 Timothy 1:10; Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:11.

Salvation “from their sins” is promised as in the following Old Testament passages:

“O Israel hope in the LORD; for with the LORD there is lovingkindness, and with Him is abundant redemption. And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.” Psalm 130:7-8.

“But He was wounded for our transgression, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed.” Isaiah 53:5.

“But I will deliver them (save them) from all their backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. And they will be my people and I will be their God.” Ezekiel 37:23

Now all this took place that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled,

“All this” refers to the pregnancy of Mary and the command to Joseph to marry Mary and to name the child, Jesus.

“What was spoken by the LORD through the prophet” refers to the following prophecy by the prophet Isaiah.

[Seven hundred years before Christ was born, Judah was in a desperate situation. Jerusalem, the capital, was threatened by powerful enemies. Isaiah came to the king to announce that God would prevent the fall of the city. The Davidic king did not believe the prophet and to prove that the prophet was telling the truth, God gave the following miraculous sign to the king. We are not told how this sign occurred but some believe that the child was the son of Isaiah himself and “the prophetess.” However, an ordinary birth would have hardly been a sign.

That historic event (the birth to the virgin in the original setting of Isaiah’s day) signaled the truth of Isaiah’s prophecy concerning Jerusalem which did actually come to pass.]

saying, “BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD, AND SHALL BEAR A SON,

Isaiah’s prophecy had a future event in mind as well as the contemporary events of Isaiah’s own day. Matthew identifies it as a prophecy of the Christ’s birth. This virgin in Isaiah’s future was Mary. The Son is Jesus.

AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,

Immanuel is the transliteration of the Hebrew עִמָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים ‘with us God.’”<sup>13</sup>

Which translated means ‘God with us.’”

Since Matthew is apparently writing to a non-Hebrew speaking audience, he gives them (and us) the meaning of the name.

And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took her as his wife,

Joseph went to her parents’ house and brought her to his own home as tradition demanded, with one exception:

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<sup>13</sup> The Isaiah passage in Hebrew reads: And she shall call his name . . .” In the Greek LXX it reads “And you shall call his name . . .” Here in Matthew it reads in Greek: “And they shall call His name . . .” Apparently there have been transmission problems with the verb. The important point is that He will be called Immanuel with which all the texts agree.

and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

He did not consummate the marriage, but kept her as a virgin until the birth. As a virgin she gave birth to her Son exactly as the prophecy stated she would. Joseph did not forget to obey the command of the Angel with regards to the name of the Child.

## APPLICATION

Although we refer to January 6<sup>th</sup> popularly as Armenian Christmas, the day we celebrate Christ's nativity, Sourp Dznount, we also know it as Epiphany and Theophany, Asdvadz-a-haydnootyoon. On this day the other Orthodox churches celebrate along with us the Baptism of our Lord.

It has often puzzled Bible scholars that Jesus Christ, the only sinless Man, came to be baptized by John the Baptist. Since John's baptism has been called a "baptism of repentance,"<sup>14</sup> why did Jesus ask to be baptized? He had no sins to repent. Even John, realizing that he was faced with a holier man than himself tried to prevent it and said, "I have need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus convinced John by giving this reply: "Permit it at this time, for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." What did He mean?

We Armenians have an ancient custom that may reflect what Jesus meant. But first we need to understand what the Baptism of John the Baptist signified. As the Apostle Paul said, it was a baptism of repentance. By Jesus' day, the people, which God had established with a sacred covenant to serve in His purpose of salvation for the world, had strayed far from God in their hearts. True, their religious observances seemed to proclaim their devotion to God, but this was, for most, simply an outward display, an ethnic tradition of their cherished culture. John was sent by God to call them back—repentance, *μετανοία*, basically means 'a change of mind.' He called them back to commitment to God. Those who came were then baptized.

John was sent to prepare the people for the coming of the great King, the Christ, and the Savior of the world. Baptism, *βάπτισμος*, was a dipping. Dirty dishes were dipped in soapy water, fabrics were dipped in dyes. What was dipped could be seen afterwards that it had been dipped. The dishes were clean; the fabrics were stained with the dye. The thing dipped had been identified with the purpose of the dipping. Those who came to John for his baptism recognized that they had turned away from God. But now they were turning back to Him and identifying themselves with the great program of God. They were affirming the covenant of salvation made with their ancient forefathers. They would be obedient to God's will for their lives. They had a role to play in the Kingdom, a proclaiming role, a witnessing role. They would fulfill the ancient role their generation had forsaken. They would carry the message of God's salvation to the ends of the world.

Jesus came to John to be baptized, to be identified with the purpose of John's baptism, to affirm His role in the Kingdom of God. He would fulfill all righteousness. He would be

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<sup>14</sup> Acts of the Apostles 19:4.

obedient to the will of God for His life. And what was that role? The role the angel proclaimed to Joseph before His birth. He would save His people from their sins. Just as John's people proclaimed, by being baptized, that they were ready to be obedient to God's will for them, so Jesus proclaimed, by being baptized, that He accepted God's will for Him. He would fulfill the purpose of His birth; He would die for the sins of the world.

We Armenians remember this event in a very special and appropriate way. We baptize a cross. This cross is a symbol of the death of Jesus Christ for our sins. In His purpose of salvation for the world, God's plan for Jesus was death on the Cross. As He stepped into the waters of the Jordan River that day, Jesus embraced His mission, the Cross. As we baptize the symbolic cross, we demonstrate again that great act of commitment that indeed led to the Cross on which He died for us.

We too have been baptized. Most of us do not remember because we were infants at the time. Our baptism was an act of faith, on the part of our parents, that we would come to understand the Gospel, and take our place in the Kingdom of God. Have we?

Do we truly understand? Do we understand that we all have sinned? Do we understand that the penalty for even one sin is spiritual death, eternal separation from God? Do we understand what our Divine Liturgy proclaims—that Jesus Christ paid that penalty for us, once and for all, as our substitute on the Cross? Do we understand that because of Jesus' great sacrifice for us we can now be forgiven for all of our sins? That we need only truly repent and ask Him?

Are we like most of the Jews of Jesus' day and simply go through the motions of our religion because it is a part of our beloved culture? Or, are we like those who came to John for baptism in the Jordan River? They recognized that, in their hearts, they had departed from the faith of their ancient forefathers in God and they truly repented. They wanted to return to God and His purpose for their lives. Their baptism became an act of commitment that they were ready to take their place in the Kingdom, to obediently follow the King. In the end they proclaimed His message of salvation to the ends of the world. Are we like them? Have we truly repented and made that commitment?

As we start this New Year and as we witness the beautiful ceremony of the Baptism of the Cross, may we remember what it symbolizes, the commitment of Jesus Christ to die for our sins on the Cross of Calvary 2000 years ago. May we, in deep and humble thankfulness to Him, fulfill the purpose of our own baptism and in true repentance commit ourselves to His service, to follow Him and carry out our part in the Kingdom of God. If we do, this New Year will be the beginning of a wonderful and glorious future.