

**GOD TURNS THE WAYS OF THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN BY SENDING HIS SON TO BE BORN OF
A VIRGIN AND TO EXCHANGE HIS LIFE FOR US**

Sermon for Christmas Eve, 2020

Matthew 1:16

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon tonight is Matthew 1:16: **Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. She was the mother of Jesus, who is called “Christ.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Why does Matthew begin his Gospel with a genealogy? What does he want to communicate? And some of the names mentioned in Christ’s genealogy are people who are far from perfect. Remember King David? Even though Jesus was a descendant of David, David had hardly lived a perfect life. His *adultery* with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband testify to that. Abraham, the one to whom the LORD God had promised He would make a great nation and to whom Jesus would be descended, *had his doubts*. Look at the four women besides Mary, who are mentioned in Matthew’s genealogy, namely, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. They could hardly be seen as being righteous. Tamar’s husband had been killed by the Lord because of his evil ways. Judah did not keep his promise to Tamar to provide her with another husband, so she disguised herself as a harlot and conceived twins with her own father-in-law, now a widower, Judah. One of those twins would be an ancestor of Christ. Rahab had been a prostitute in Jericho who had kept the Israelite spies in safety as they surveyed the city before taking possession of the Promised Land. Yet, Rahab would also become an ancestor of the Saviour to come. Ruth was from Moab, a Gentile who had been grafted into the messianic line. Even David’s illicit relationship with Bathsheba would lead to a second son, Solomon, and David’s own King and Lord.

There is nothing clean about the list of Jesus’ ancestors. Some people are left out, and the numbers of generations Matthew counts do not quite add up. Did Matthew leave things out intentionally? Could he not count? Was he not as good a historian as Luke who gave a somewhat detailed genealogy in his Gospel?¹ All of those questions are raised when one reads the genealogy that is recorded in Matthew chapter 1. The names and the numbers simply don’t add up.

This is true! The birth of Jesus to Mary doesn’t make sense. Since He was expected to be born in King David’s royal city of Bethlehem, a pregnant girl in Nazareth couldn’t seem right. We would expect the One to be called Lord by King David would be born in a palace, not in a stable. He should have been wrapped in the finest of fabrics, such as silk or cotton rather than swaddling cloths. Perhaps the most shocking part of the angels’ birth announcement to the shepherds was the fact that they would find the Saviour, Christ the Lord, lying in a manger, an animals’ food trough. None of it makes sense at all, right down to a young, unmarried girl giving birth to the promised Messiah.

But Mary understood that God does not operate the way the world does. From the time when the angel Gabriel appeared to her, she had learned how differently God would be at work. While she wondered how she, a virgin, could bear the Son of the Most High, her response was, “*Look! I am the Lord’s servant. May it happen to me as you have said!*” (Luke 1:38). Her seemingly barren cousin Elizabeth also conceived in a way that seemed unimaginable. But nothing is impossible for God.²

When Mary went to visit her cousin, her song was one of praise to the God who does the impossible. She burst forth saying, “*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God, my Saviour,* ⁴⁸ *because He has looked kindly on the humble state of His servant. For look! From now on all generations will call me blessed.* ⁴⁹ *For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and His name is holy;* ⁵⁰ *and He is merciful to those who fear Him throughout all generations.* ⁵¹ *He has performed mighty deeds with His arm. He has scattered those who have proud thoughts in their hearts.* ⁵² *He has brought strong rulers down from their thrones but has exalted lowly people.* ⁵³ *He has filled hungry people with good things but has sent rich people away empty.* ⁵⁴ *He has come to help His servant Israel, so that He*

¹ Luke 3:21-38

² Luke 1:37

has remembered to be merciful,⁵ to Abraham and his descendants for ever, as He has promised our fathers” (Luke 1:47-55). We call this portion of Scripture the *Magnificat* (from the first word in the Latin translation). Martin Luther wrote of the Magnificat: “When the holy virgin experienced what great things God was working in her despite her insignificance, lowliness, poverty, and inferiority, the Holy Spirit taught her this deep insight and wisdom, that God is the kind of Lord who does nothing but exalt those of low degree and put down the mighty from their thrones, in short, breaks what is whole and makes whole what is broken” (AE 21:299).

Dear friends, on account of our sin, we, too, are the humble and hungry, the lowly. We are spiritually impoverished without any possible hope to reverse our fortunes. Since we cannot restore things on our own, we need someone to come and save us. That was God’s plan from the very beginning. God spoke words of promise as He banished Adam and Eve from the Garden by promising that one of their own descendants would crush for them the serpent’s head.³ The Old Testament is full of signs pointing us forward to the fulfilment of that promise. From Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Judah and Tamar, Rahab and Ruth, David and Bathsheba, Joseph and Mary, we see how the LORD God was at work, weaving His plan of salvation through each subsequent generation, right up until the Holy Spirit came upon Mary so that she would become pregnant with the long-promised Messiah. It may not make sense to the world, but God does not operate the way the world does.

While Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, He still was born of the Virgin Mary, and therefore, according to His human nature, He ate and drank, wept and slept, felt emotions and physical pain - like all other human beings. Jesus had to be conceived by the Holy Spirit to be of the same substance with the Father, to be truly God, without sin, perfect and holy in every way, but He also had to be born of Mary, Mary who “**was the mother of Jesus, who is called “Christ.”**” He had to be flesh and blood, truly human in fulfilment of the promise that “*the virgin will conceive and bear a son*” (Isaiah 7:14). He would come into this world to save His people from their sins by shedding His blood on the cross for the forgiveness of their sins. He would come to redeem us - to buy us back for God. Not with gold or silver but with His holy, precious blood. Jesus had to be fully God, but He also had to be fully human so that He could shed that blood on the cross for us.

It doesn’t make sense that the Son of God on the night of His betrayal, would get up from the table and, with a towel and basin, wash His disciples’ feet.⁴ It doesn’t make sense that the Holy One of Israel would associate with an adulterous Samaritan woman⁵ or heal the Roman centurion’s servant.⁶ It doesn’t make sense that this Descendant of David and Abraham would associate with such people as tax collectors and prostitutes. Most of all, it does not make sense that the Son of God *would come to die.* But that’s just the kind of Lord He is. “**Christ**” means “anointed one.” As our anointed, it is in His wounds that we find healing. It is in His taking on our shame that we are made righteous. It is in His being forsaken that we are restored. And it is in His death that we live. How truly backward it seems! But it should really come as no shock at all that God’s way seems so very foreign to sinners.

The resurrection did not make sense either. Everyone expected that Jesus’ body would be found in the tomb. The fact that the stone was rolled away and that His body was missing must have been the work of the gardener, or else some enemy like the Pharisees must have taken Him. But once again, God’s design doesn’t have to make sense to us. The numbers don’t have to add up. Matthew did not intend to list all the ancestors of Jesus or for the numbers to line up just right. His genealogy shows us that while the family of Jesus was fraught with mistakes and misdeeds, the promised Descendant would be perfect in every way. In fact, though Jesus’ family was marred by sin, God’s plan of salvation was perfect; Christ exchanged His holiness for our sin and His death for our life. And death could not hold Jesus, so in the resurrection on the Last Day, we shall, like Job of old, see with our own eyes our Redeemer, who lives.⁷

What it means for you is that *God still doesn’t work the way that the world does.* God still turns the world upside down and doesn’t operate the way the world expects. The almighty God became a tiny baby, knit together in Mary’s womb. The King of kings and Lord of lords was born to an unknown peasant girl with a questionable lineage. He still

³ Genesis 3:15

⁴ John 13:1-17

⁵ John 4:1-30

⁶ Matthew 8:5-13

⁷ Job 19:25-27

comes to us today through His Word, attached to the ordinary elements of water and bread and wine. His power is still made perfect in our weakness.⁸ What we deserve for our actions is death, but He has given us the free gift of eternal life. We, the lowly, are exalted by God humbling His Son.

Nothing about this story makes sense, as Luther wrote: “[God] turns the world with all its wisdom and power into foolishness and gives us another wisdom and power” (AE 21:314). A virgin found to be with child. A Saviour wrapped in swaddling cloths. A King lying in a manger. Peace on earth in infant form. Good News for all the world announced to shepherds. But it all comes together as God’s plan and His fulfilment of His promises. God turns the ways of the world upside down by sending His only Son to be born of a virgin and to exchange His life for ours.

The genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David and the Son of Abraham, demonstrates this with every name and every generation. God’s ways are certainly not our ways, but He has remained faithful to all of His promises that were given to all the saints of old. The list of names in Matthew’s genealogy serves as a beautiful reminder that Jesus Christ **has come for all people**. The genealogy of Jesus isn’t a fairy tale. It is a reality show full of sinners and scandals. But all are people for whom Jesus gave His life - David and Abraham, Joseph and Mary – you and me, everyone. That is the true message of Christmas. May you all have a holy and blessed Christmas, rejoicing that Jesus has been born *for you*. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

CHRISTMAS EVE

Blessed God and Father, the source of all mercy and truth, You promised through the prophets that You would deliver Your people from condemnation. Tonight we thank and praise You that You kept Your promises, and at the right time gave to the world Your Son Jesus Christ. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom You are pleased!

We gather in awe and reverence around Christ’s manger-throne to worship the morning star of salvation who has risen upon us. Help us to accept this great mystery and wonder that the Son of God has taken human form for our sake, and brought light and life to those in darkness and death. We worship You in love and wonder that You have done such great things for unworthy sinners like us. How unsearchable are Your actions! How inscrutable are Your ways!

We thank and praise You, O Father, that by Jesus’ birth You have established Your kingdom among those who deserve only that You should turn away from them. But You have made Your face to shine on us, and Your countenance to smile on us; You have given us peace in Him who is the Prince of peace. As we think about the wonder of the incarnation, that the Son of the Most High took the nature of a servant and appeared in human likeness, fill us with new gratitude and joy, that faith, hope, and love may increase in each one of us. Help each one of us to find in this Babe of Bethlehem the way of salvation, forgiveness of sins, deliverance from every evil power, and the sure hope of life everlasting.

Grant that the new-born King may rule in the hearts of all people everywhere. Extend His kingdom among the nations of the earth. Enable Your people to grow in grace and love, and to abound in joy, peace, faith, and every good work. Help us all, both young and old, to proclaim the Good News of the Saviour’s birth in church, home, school, shop, and marketplace, with the abilities that You give according to Your wise love.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus, our Saviour and King. Amen.

⁸ 2 Corinthians 12:9

CHRISTMAS EVE

Isaiah 7:10-14

¹⁰ The LORD spoke again to Ahaz: ¹¹ “Claim a miraculous sign for yourself from the LORD, your God! Make the request a deep one or make it high up above!”

¹² However, Ahaz answered, “I shall not ask for one. I shall not put the LORD to the test.”

¹³ Isaiah said: “Listen now, family of David! Is it too little for you to exhaust the patience of men, that you also exhaust the patience of my God? ¹⁴ Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a miraculous sign: Look! The virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a Son and she will call His name ‘Immanuel.’”

1 John 4:7-16

⁷ Dearly loved people, let us love one another! For love comes from God and everyone who loves has been given birth by God and knows God. ⁸ The one who does not love has not known God, because God is Love. ⁹ This is how God has shown His love among us: He has sent His only Son into the world that we may live through Him. ¹⁰ This is what love is: not that we have loved God, but that He has loved us and has sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dearly loved people, since that is how God has loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God remains in us and His love has been brought to maturity in us. ¹³ This is how we know that we remain in Him and He in us: He has given us His Spirit. ¹⁴ We have seen and testify that the Father has sent His Son as the Saviour of the world. ¹⁵ If anyone confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God remains in him and he remains in God. ¹⁶ We have also known and have believed the love that God has for us. God is Love; and he who remains in love remains in God and God remains in him.

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸ This is how Jesus Christ was born. His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph. However, before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Joseph, her husband, was an honourable man and, because he did not want to disgrace her, he intended to divorce her secretly. ²⁰ After Joseph had thought about it, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take your wife Mary home with you! For what has been conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

²¹ She will give birth to a son and you shall name Him ‘Jesus’! For He will save His people from their sins.”

²² All this happened to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “Look! The virgin will become pregnant and have a son and they will name Him ‘Immanuel’” (which is translated, “God-With-Us”).

²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did what the Lord’s angel had commanded him. He took Mary home as his wife, ²⁵ but did not have relations with her until she gave birth to a Son. Joseph gave Him the name “Jesus.”

