



**Matthew 1:18-2:23**  
**The Story of Christmas**

Summary: The 'story' of Christmas shows real people in need of a real savior.

This morning we're going to look at the story of Christmas, but I have to confess, I really don't like that word – story – because it can sound like fiction, a 'story' you tell. Star Wars is a 'story.' Harry Potter is a 'story.' Dune is a 'story.' But Jesus is real.

The events of Christmas happened in a place you can visit today. It wasn't on Tatooine or at Hogwarts or in Narnia or Middle Earth. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He lived in Israel. He died and was buried just outside Jerusalem. He is real.

And so are all the other people in the story, the names of the religious and political leaders involved can be found in history books and archeological digs. And that's important to know because if real people were involved in the 'story' back then, that means real people like you and me can still be affected by the story today.

So, let's spend some reviewing the 'account' of the events and prepare our hearts for what, and why, we'll celebrate next weekend.

Read with me:

**Matthew 1:18** Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit.

19 Then Joseph her husband, being a just *man*, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. 20 But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. 21 And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins."

22 So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: 23 "*Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,*" which is translated, "God with us."

24 Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, 25 and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.

So, right away we see something significant about the birth of Jesus. We're told that He was supernaturally conceived. In other words, Jesus was born of Mary, but Joseph had nothing to do with it.

We often speak of the virgin birth, but the virgin *conception* is a more accurate way of describing things and this is a foundational doctrine of the Christian faith. Since the earliest days of the church, Christians have affirmed the Apostle's Creed, that "He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary."

There is no explanation in Scripture of *how* it happened in technical terms. Luke's gospel gives us more details, but not much. He tells of an angel who came to Mary and told her that God had chosen her to bring His Son into the world. She asked how that could be since she was a virgin – and the angel simply told her the Holy Spirit would overshadow her and she would conceive in her womb. *That's all the detail we get*, but she responded "Behold, the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

And friends, sometimes that is how we have to respond as well – God calls us to do something and we don't get all the answers, we don't fully understand how it's all going to work out, but we echo the words of Mary, "Behold, the servant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word."

Sometimes, like any parent, God the Father tells us as His children, to just trust Him without receiving a full explanation. And we, like children, have to accept that. We have to trust and obey, and maybe He'll tell us when we're a little older.

So, God was doing something exceptional, something extraordinary here, and He invited Mary and Joseph to go along with it.

The young couple was betrothed – a condition something like our modern engagement period – a time when the commitment has been made and now preparations are undertaken for the actual ceremony and life together afterwards, only the Jewish version was legally binding – in order to call off the engagement you needed a bill of divorce.

So in the middle of that imagine your fiancé has been out of town for a while - remember Mary had gone to visit her relatives Zacharias and Elizabeth who were miraculously pregnant in their old age with John the Baptist - and when Mary gets back to town it's obvious that she's pregnant too. If you're Joseph, what are you thinking? It's not good is it?

But I want you to notice there is something to be said for the character of both this young man and young woman. His initial reaction was to divorce her; I don't think anyone is going to blame him for that. But notice: he wanted to do it quietly, without making a big fuss. I think that says a lot about him and also about her.

He didn't understand at first, but *he also didn't automatically think it was the kind of thing she would do*. He didn't see her as the kind of girl that would go sleeping around, this was totally out of character for her. And yet, obviously *something had happened*. Unable to make sense of it all, and not wanting to expose her any more than necessary, he planned to break things off quietly.

That says a lot about him – he was a man of tremendous character. He doesn't lash out in rage or anger, he doesn't make a scene for her publicly. He is a man of action – he *is* going to put her away, but he's a man of *measured and merciful* action, a man of self-control, who is going to do it *quietly*.

Until, God sends an angel to speak with him too. The angel tells Joseph what is happening. God is going to use him, the "Son of David" as the angel calls him in vs 20, this descendent of the famous king will be the adopted father of Jesus, he will give this special child legal standing in the line of King David, this child who will be known as the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

Of course, the birth of someone with a claim to be king will provoke a variety of responses when people hear the news as we're about to see in Chapter Two.

**Matthew 2:1** Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

They were coming from somewhere in the East, probably Persia (Iran), though perhaps Babylonia (Iraq), or Arabia (Saudi Arabia). And they were not unheard of; if you want to specialize in Ancient Near Eastern history you can learn all about the magi who lived at this time. They were priestly philosophers, students of science, medicine, philosophy, religion and astrology. They're interesting people and you can read some fascinating things about them if you're interested in exploring the subject.

This morning though, I just want to point out that they came, a long distance, at great expense, to see what God was doing, *because they believed He was at work*. They saw this star – and again, if you want to dig into the subject, astronomers can reconstruct the sky during this time frame and you find that there was a confluence of Jupiter and Venus and all kinds of other things happening in the skies – whether that's what God was using to signal them or not, we really don't know, but there's plenty of stuff in the historical records that really happened, and you can dive into it if you really want to.

But back to our point: God got the attention of these wise men, and they followed the star to discover more. They were interested, they were curious, and so they came, planning to worship.

Those of you who know your Scriptures may recognize a pattern here. Thousands of years prior God called another great man out of the East, who did not know exactly where he was going, but faithfully followed God. That man was Abraham and God led him to what would be known as the Promised Land, Israel. Now hundreds and hundreds of years later, God was leading the wise men along the same path to the see the Promised Messiah.

The Promised Land was a place given to the Jews, to the descendants of Abraham, but the point was always to draw in the nations, that people from all over the world would come to

worship the God of all nations. And now, we see the beginning of that fulfillment as Magi, Gentiles, people from outside the faith and outside the ethnic boundaries of the Jewish people are coming to worship. God has a heart for all the nations, and we see it in action here as He calls people from the outside to come in and play a prominent role in the birth of God's Son.

As Christians, this is where we connect with the story, because we have come from all over the city this morning, representing who knows how many ethnicities and nationalities, to sit in this room, and worship God on this hill because we believe God is at work, and we want to see what He is doing. We have come to bring an offering to Him – an offering of praise, and also an offering of our treasures – to lay them at His feet as we worship.

Of course, not everyone responds this way when God is at work, some people resist and rebel

**3 When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.**

Herod is a very interesting man. He is serving as the king in Israel, under the approval of the Roman Empire. He's not a true Jew, he's not of the line of King David, but through a tremendous amount of politicking, maneuvering, and murdering he has secured the endorsement of Rome. It's another thing you can look into if you're interested and you can read up on all the history involved here including the role Herod played in the drama that unfolded between Marc Antony and Cleopatra and the rise of Caesar Augustus.

But right now what you need to know is: this is a man who was desperate to hold onto his position of power. So desperate, he actually murdered his own wife, mother-in-law, his beautiful daughter, and his three oldest sons (even though he personally liked them) lest they try to overthrow him or be used in a plot against him. Caesar Augustus once said it was safer to be Herod's pig (hus) than his son (huios) – a little play on words.

So, you see the terrible timing of it all – Herod is getting older, he's 69 at this point, and he's increasingly suspicious of people trying to overthrow him. It's not a good time for a rival king to be born, in fact it's an awful time, but God is at work and His work is unstoppable.

So, Herod hears about the new king

**4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.**

**5 So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:**

***6 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;  
For out of you shall come a Ruler  
Who will shepherd My people Israel.'***

7 Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found *Him*, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

Now, it's interesting to me that these religious leaders *who knew where the Messiah was supposed to be born* weren't tripping over themselves to say, "Wait! He's here? Let's go with these guys and see what they find!"

Is there a chance that they were afraid of what Herod the king would think if they went along to worship too? Well, is there a chance that Christians in our own government are afraid to go and worship Jesus because of what their supervisors might think? There certainly is. The interesting thing is, Jesus *will* be worshipped, He *will* be praised, the Wise men *will* do it, but others *who could have been there* will miss out. Friend, don't let that be you.

9 When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

They were genuinely excited to come and worship Christ, to see what God was doing. The Christian life is not all drudgery and obligation; it is not bland and boring. There is, in Christ, in His church, in worship, joy, **exceedingly great joy**, for those who seek it.

11 And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Notice: as the wise men rejoiced, they gave. They gave their honor – these 'wise men' fell down, worshipped Jesus, and presented Him with gifts. They set the pattern we still follow today – when we gather as a church, we express our adoration for Christ and we give Him gifts, from our wallet, our checkbook, or online giving, we're putting some measure of our own treasure at the feet of our God just like these men did so long ago. Giving is an act of worship, it is not a religious subscription, or membership fee, or tax deductible donation to a non-profit organization, it is an act of worship.

12 Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

13 Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him."

One commentator wrote: "Herod was afraid this little child was going to interfere with his life, his place, his power, his influence, and therefore his first instinct was to destroy him. There are still those who would gladly destroy Jesus Christ, because they see in him the one who interferes with their lives." (Barclay, 30)

Those words sting, but they are true. “They see in him the one who interferes with their lives.” Friends, Jesus does not interfere with our lives, He wants to redeem, reclaim, and rescue our lives. He’s not messing things up; He’s making them what they should be.

Of course, that’s not how Herod sees it. He has no desire to surrender to God, so for now Joseph, Mary, and their young son must flee.

14 When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, 15 and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, “*Out of Egypt I called My Son.*”

At this time in history there were over a million Jews living in the city of Alexandria alone. We don’t know this is where they went for sure, but it wasn’t that far away from Jerusalem, and it was a big city, still governed by the Romans, but outside of Herod’s jurisdiction. And, the young family had the money to make the trip and resettle thanks to the gold and other treasures they had just received. In other words, *God met their needs as their faithfully followed him.*

But meanwhile, word got out that the Child had escaped:

16 Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying:

18 “*A voice was heard in Ramah,  
Lamentation, weeping, and great mourning,  
Rachel weeping for her children,  
Refusing to be comforted,  
Because they are no more.*”

We look at this and we’re horrified, and we should be. But we should be even more horrified to realize *this was just one act of cruelty and depravity in Herod’s long life.* Bethlehem was a small village, estimates are this might have resulted in the death of 20-30 kids; he had been responsible for hundreds more than this already.

And the same kind of suffering continues today, even in our own times. Why? Because of evil in the hearts of human beings. The fact that humans are willing to do something like this to other humans is proof that we need a savior. And yet, when that savior came to earth in the least threatening manner imaginable – in the form of an innocent child, a selfish human being tried to kill Him.

Let us be honest and admit: we live in a world that opposes Jesus, that doesn't want to receive Him, a world that loves itself and which will hurt others who get in the way. But no

man, or woman, can hold onto their power or position forever, sooner or later, death comes for us all...and then the judgment. Meanwhile, God continues to unfold His sovereign plan.

19 Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, 20 saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead." 21 Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.

22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee. 23 And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene."

Archelaus was even worse than his father – not long after taking the throne, he killed 3000 Jews, in the Temple, at Passover. That's *100 times* as many boys as his dad killed in Bethlehem. The wise men paid a high price to worship God – they took a lot of time for the trip and gave a tremendous treasure to the infant king. Archelaus and his father Herod paid a tremendous price to worship too – only they worshipped power, position, and authority, and they worshipped those idols with cunning, violence, and human lives.

This is the 'story' of the events surrounding the birth of Christ. They happened in real places and involved very real people who all had one thing in common: they needed this child.

Mary, the young woman with curious faith, and Joseph, the young man with good character; the wise men who had education and money; and Herod, the desperate king, they all needed Jesus. None of them was good enough without Him, and none of them had enough without Him. So He came for them all.

And friends, there's a little bit of Mary and Joseph, a little bit of the wise men, and little bit of Herod in each of us in us; a little virtue, a little nobility and generosity, a little selfish depravity. And so, we all need Jesus too.

If you have not received this salvation, or if you're not sure if you have received this salvation, and you would like to, or you would like to be sure – all you have to do is respond to the Christ who has come to you today.

Mary was told (Matt 1:21), "**you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.**" Agree with God that you are a sinner, that you need to be saved, and receive the salvation He offers you through His sacrifice on the cross. There are no special words you have to use, nothing special you have to do, He sees directly into the truth of your soul.

But you could pray something along these lines: Heavenly Father, I see my need for salvation. I know that I have sinned, I have rebelled against you, I have been selfish and ugly toward others, I know that all my best attempts to be good and do good have not been



enough, and so I ask for your forgiveness and help. I come, like the wise men to bow before your Son and worship. I say, like Mary, “Behold the servant the of the Lord, may it be to me according to Your pleasure.” Receive me God, for I want to be changed. I want to be yours. Amen.

If that expresses the true desire of your heart, then God has heard your prayers, and you are saved. The Bible says, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” When you come to the Son of God, you become a child of God. Guaranteed.

So join your new brothers and sisters in Christ as we come before our Father again this morning and pray and then let us rejoice with exceedingly great joy, like the wise men, over what we have found in Christ today.

Let's pray.

*Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

- Rom 15:13





## Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

### Matthew 1:18-2:23 The Story of Christmas

Summary: The 'story' of Christmas shows real people in need of a real savior.

- What are your favorite memories of Christmas growing up?
  - What do you remember about "The Christmas Story?" Was it an important part of your celebration and memories?
  - What role, if any, did the church play?
- Who are your favorite people in the story? Why?
  - Think of each of the following people and consider: what would have been hard for them to believe? And, what did they get out of the first Christmas?
    - Joseph
    - Mary
    - Herod
    - The wise men
    - The priests and scribes
- What is the farthest you have ever traveled for the Lord – to visit someone, to go on a missions trip, to attend a concert or hear a speaker?
- What is the hardest thing God has ever asked you to believe, by faith?
  - Has God provided the reason/answer for you yet, or are you still waiting?
- Why do you think the priests and scribes did not go with the wise men to see for themselves what had happened?
- What do you make of the fact that Herod put so many innocent children to death when Jesus was born? What does that tell you about our own desires to hold on to power, privilege, and position?
  - When you feel your own kingship/sovereignty threatened by Jesus how do you react?
- What can we do to emphasize the original reason for Jesus' arrival (Matt 1:21) on the first Christmas during our own celebrations each year?
- Why is the virgin birth so important to the Christian faith?
- Why is the fact that Jesus is fully God and full man so significant?