

## **“Savior and With-Us God”**

(Matthew 1:18-25)

Christmas Eve, December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace on this Holy Night from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. How is your Christmas dear Christian shaping up thus far? I'm sure there are many good things that you are thankful for, but on the other hand, it wouldn't surprise me if you also know your fair share of turbulence to the extent that your Christmas might be falling short of those perfect Hallmark scenes where everything is hunky-dory (just fine) so that your family is a 2014 version of the late 50's/early 60's T.V. show “Leave It To Beaver” celebrating the iconic post-war American family! June the perfect housewife; Ward the dad who always wore a suit to dinner; the patient big-brother Wally and of course Theodore (“The Beaver”) the good-hearted kid. It was the first American show broadcast behind the Iron Curtain perhaps because of its many references to God, Sunday school and breaking bread. Everything in this picture-perfect image of the American family is orderly: the parents never argue; the kids are obedient even if adventurous; and life runs smoothly! Isn't this just like your life? It's just like our getting onto a 737 – esp. for those of us who struggle with anxiety – and you *always* get that smooth, uneventful flight that you hope for right?

Matthew's presentation of Christmas *isn't* this way and Luther taught that this text expresses the turbulent side of the Christmas story (Concordia Journal, v36, n4, 366). Turbulence and Christmas?! Do these concepts really go together? When I think of turbulence – besides the kind that warms my heart when I fly – I also think of roller coasters. The older I get, the less I want to ride them...nowadays they start to fill my heart with dread. Just consider the warning signs that confront us while in line before we get on a roller coaster: this is a high-speed *turbulent* ride and people who are pregnant, have back problems, motion sickness or heart irregularities should *not* ride. And some of these rides are so turbulent that if you didn't have one of these symptoms *before* the ride, you could very well have one *after* the ride with the exception of course of being pregnant...well, unless you were Mary living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century instead of the 1<sup>st</sup> and finding yourself in Valencia, CA (where Magic Mountain is) instead of Nazareth.

The Christmas context in Matthew chapter one is chock-full of turbulence. It is as if God is saying, “I don't want you to reduce Christmas to a season of sentimentality, but rather understand that the Savior of the world came into a *turbulent* world to save sinners in turbulence and to demonstrate that the God of grace, love, and all-helping rescue is with us in our turbulence...we are saved...through our “plane rides” that fill us with fear; through our “roller coasters” that make us sick; and through our less than idyllic families – as much as we absolutely love them – that challenge us to our wits end. And not just saved in the sense of getting through these things – as in being rescued – but saved in such a way that ultimately we come out of all of these better than we have ever been (in Jesus even death is transformed in resurrection)...that's the kind of salvation the Lord brings!

This is the context of Matthew chapter 1, the first Christmas. The precise Christmas text of verses 18-25 is ushered in with turbulent drama that in my opinion makes even the most scandalous shows today look like Leave It to Beaver and this is all recorded in the Holy Bible, the Word of God! This is the book of the

genesis/the origin of Jesus Christ – Matthew 1:1 – and God’s providential order is demonstrated: 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 from David to Babylon, 14 from Babylon to Christ (verse 17). Everything is orderly, everything is tidy...well, until you start reading between the lines that is.

This is Jesus’ family tree. Now as I raise my children I often tell them, “Life is hard enough as it is, so we don’t need to try to make it harder!” And then I go on about the wasted energy and unnecessary hardship that comes from envy, worry, insulting others, complaining, etc. But even on their best days, they make it harder just like their Daddy does. Jesus’ family indeed appears as though they just went out of their way to make things harder! Sinners are drawn to turbulence.

Consider the questionable quality of Jesus’ genesis: one of His great great grandmothers deceives her father-in-law (one of Jesus’ great great grandfathers) into a scandalous encounter. He is actually the greater sinner here and admits as much (Gen 38:26) as he intended to be with a prostitute. No one saw this coming! God chooses the prostitute Rahab in Jericho to help his people and to ensure their victory (Joshua 2). No one saw this coming! Ruth – a foreign outcast – would be used by God as one of Jesus’ most blessed great grandmothers to demonstrate the Christological theme of redemption, but no one could see this coming! King David – the great and holy king with a heart after God’s heart – commits both murder and adultery...and God works through Bathsheba to bring Jesus to save! No one saw this coming! King Ahaz appointed to anticipate the King of Kings in Jesus’ royal line rejects God’s offer to give him a sign (Isaiah 7:10-12). No one saw this coming! King Mannasseh of the holy line of kings is the opposite of holy and so evil that he engages in the most destructive forms of occult practice. He was a murderer of his own son and sought the things of Satan instead of God. Such a throne would lead to the Savior...no one could see this coming. Turbulence, turbulence, turbulence...and then came the time for Jesus’ birth.

Surely if there was ever time that things would finally calm down and become just a little more manageable and predictable, it had to be this time, the very first Christmas! Right?! Not quite! It’s hard to put ourselves in Joseph’s shoes. The Word of God pays him an enormous compliment: he was “*dikaïos*”...a justified man; a man of faith; a man of God, a true child of God. He was -- as opposed to wicked Ahaz -- one trusting in the Lord, He was a pious offspring of King David. And he was betrothed. This is a concept that far exceeds our American idea of “engagement”...for all intents and purposes betrothal means that you *are* married, but you must live in a sacred and reverential way (you can’t even be alone with your betrothed during this time; there could be no intimacy). He must have been very excited and he was probably very happy. And then everything went crazy. Everything seemed to be spinning out of control. No one could see this turbulence coming.

We don’t know how he found out, but Joseph became aware that his betrothed Mary was pregnant and he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was *not* his child! To make matters worse, Nazareth was a small town with a population not a lot larger than our baptized membership here at Saint Paul’s. Word would spread in nothing flat. What was this righteous man going through? He must have been heart-broken, he must have felt some humiliation, and he was surely completely aware of his rights. He could have accused her of her adultery before the council of Nazareth which could have resulted in her execution (Concordia Journal, v15, n4, 482). But Joseph was declared righteous by God through faith in the coming Messiah and his holy life

given to Him by the Lord flowed out with forgiveness. Through the work of God in his life Joseph on this day demonstrates what our turbulent lives need more than anything else: forgiveness. We need forgiveness, because without it turbulence leads to disaster. Forgiveness is God putting His hand underneath our plane; or straightening the tracks on our roller coaster; or healing our families so fraught with issues. Forgiveness is the medicine against the poison of sin. Forgiveness makes turbulence lose its terrifying power...it takes fear away.

Joseph had opportunity to “cast the first stone!” The propensity for revenge that is killing American families (Concordia Journal, v30, n4). But Joseph chose God’s way. To put it plainly: Joseph decided to forgive Mary (of course not yet realizing that Mary was not at all guilty of what he was assuming). But God came to this man of forgiveness to announce forgiveness. As the first Joseph had a son in Joshua who led the people of God to the Promised Land; this Joseph would have a son *Yeshua*/Joshua/Jesus to lead the people of God -- like you and me -- to the Promised Land on a road paved by His blood for the forgiveness of sins.

But Joseph could not have seen this coming! How could God possibility work through his turbulence? And when the angel appeared, make no doubt about it, he was afraid (and all the while Mary must have been going through her own fear...Mary knew the truth, but if she had been the one to tell him, she could not expect Joseph to believe her). So -- like Mary -- Joseph full of anxiety; his head spinning already before the angel appears, and then with the appearing, full of fear. And then through the angel, God’s Word is given: “do not fear.” And did you know Christian the Word of God never admonishes you not to be afraid without giving you the REASON. “In the hour of great need and sorrow, the Lord intervenes to cause us to do the right thing and to banish our sorrows.” (Buls, *Gospel Texts, Series A*, 12-13)

Christians, it is easy to glide over this first Gospel proclamation in Matthew 1, but we mustn’t because it is astounding and we’re given the REASON why we won’t be wiped out by our turbulence. Evidently – and according to God’s Word – to know Jesus is to know Him in a two-fold way: 1) He is Savior; and 2) He is Immanuel/Emmanuel = which when literally translated is “With-Us God.” Already latent in this very first Christmas revelation is the fact that Jesus is the Son of David – from that turbulent family – and that He is also the glorious Son of God because He is the “With-Us God!”

And I submit to you that whether or not our faith knows the both-and reality makes the difference as to whether your faith will be a so-called “faith” of sentiment (religious feelings, trite positive thoughts that desperately and unsuccessfully try to deal with the tragedies of life) or a *real* faith that is founded on the Savior who doesn’t skip town on you, but who hangs around and stays with you through thick and thin. Too many people say in a religious and spiritual tone that is empty: “Jesus saves.” As if the saying itself was a check in the box to make it to heaven...in the mean time -- unfortunately -- you’re without hope in a mess on earth. This won’t do for Christmas, not the real Christmas anyway.

First of all to be saved from sin can only be appreciated if one knows what “sin” is. A good way of translating it in modern language: it’s the evil in life that destroys life. It is so destructive that it stains our souls and brings spiritual as well as bodily death. In Matthew 1 sin means “missing the mark as with an arrow,” and how often the best of us fall short and fail to score? “Jesus...save[s] us away from (*apo*) as well as out of (*ex*)

our sins. They [are] cast into oblivion and he [does] cover them up out of sight.” (Robertson, *Word Pictures*, v1, 11)

“Behold the strange and wonderful birth of Christ. It came though a line that included sinners, adulterers and Gentiles. But such a birth does not soil the honor of Christ. Rather, it commends his mercy...Among men, fathers adopt whomever they wish to be their sons [and daughters]. This son, however, adopted [us].” (Anonymous, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament Ia. 13)

In truth an adopted child experiences a powerfully affirming love: they are chosen by their parents, hand-selected. That is how much they are loved! And this is how Jesus loved and loves you: With all of your issues; and with all of your drama; and with all of your turbulence, He hand-picked you. He chose you. Christmas is His coming for real, live sinners whose lives are all over the map and not at all the Hallmark scene.

“Not only does God purpose to *forgive* sins, that is, remove the guilt of sin, but Jesus will also *save* people from their sins. As the remarkable citation of Is 53:4 in Mt 8:17 shows, salvation from sin entails healing and full [end-of-time] restoration...He comes to save his people – body and soul – from their sins.” (Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 1:1-11:1*. 107-108)

This is what the Lord does with your sin this Christmas, but there’s more. Jesus the Savior is also Immanuel, the “With-Us God.” Jesus doesn’t zap in to save you and then say, “Good luck with the rest of life!” and zap out. He is called Immanuel/Emmanuel/With-Us God. Jesus “is God with us, God one of us, God, a part of humanity, God in our flesh and blood.” (Bulls quoting Ylvisaker, *ibid.* 14) And after the prophet Isaiah said that this Immanuel would come, He went on to fill in some more details about Him: “His name certainly will be “God is with us” (7:14), yet also ‘Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’” (Gibbs. 112) As a result, one day Jesus said to Philip: “He that has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9) and also said at the very end of Matthew’s Gospel: “***I am*** with you always (Matthew 28:20)...affirming that he will indeed be the With-Us God. (see Robertson, pg. 12 and Gibbs pg. 113)

But it’s all different now right? Jesus ascended since all of this right? To imply such things is to miss the significance of the rest of the story. How does the resurrected Lord “one up” the first Christmas? He’s doing it tonight this Christmas 2014. “In my father’s house are many rooms...” one ancient interpretation of this is that YOU are the rooms...the members of Christ, each of you in Christ, each of you having “Christ in you;” each of you receiving His body and blood; each of you with the Holy Spirit; each of you helping to comprise the Body of Christ; God’s most holy house...Jesus demonstrating His omnipresence through the love of His people and bringing His direct presence and help for all of our turbulence wherever we go. Could there be a better Christmas gift: not only is your sin tread under foot and cast into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19), but God is with you right now in His Church, with His Body, with His people. His help is here and it is why we rejoice to be the family of God on Christmas! Already our ride is a little smoother.