

Scandal: The Wrong News
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 7:10-15; Galatians 4:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 1:18-25. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to pull out your study guide to follow along. Let's listen to the Word of God. "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us." When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus."

"Dewey Defeats Truman!" That infamous headline from the Chicago Tribune in 1948 is a perfect example of the news getting it wrong. A lot of papers did the same thing in 2000 with the Bush/Gore election. Almost every newspaper every day has a list of corrections where they got something wrong yesterday.

But sometimes the news is just...wrong. Wrong as in bad, frustrating, absurd. It's wrong when our team loses in the final moments due to a bad call. It's wrong when the show sells out when we're next in line for tickets. It's wrong when we get sick on vacation or lose several days to find out we won't be on the jury. News is wrong when it goes against how things should be.

Last week, we began seeing the scandal of Christmas. Jesus has the wrong lineage. Sure, He comes from the line of King David, so He is qualified to be the messiah...but look at all these people in His background! Prostitutes and foreigners, adulterers and wicked kings...not what we would expect for the King of Kings. If last week was about the wrong lineage, this week is about the wrong news. Little about how Jesus came to this world seems right to us. It's scandalous. And yet it is incredibly good news for us in spite of what we may think.

So let's get right to it. Matthew's account of Jesus' birth comes from Joseph. We don't get Luke's account of an angel visiting Mary or her song of praise, just the aftermath. Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth for an extended period of time; upon her return, Joseph learns about the baby. Joseph comes up with his plan because this is a surprise. Guess what – I'm away five months and I'm pregnant!

The pledge that Mary and Joseph had was a binding agreement. It was the precursor to the wedding and the marriage, but you couldn't back out of it. The "betrothal" stage lasted a year. It proved the virtuousness of the woman, that she wasn't carrying anyone else's child. It also provided time for the man to make things ready. Usually, the man would build a home near to his in-laws if he didn't have one already. If he did, he had to turn it from a "man cave" into something befitting a young bride and, eventually, children. The only way you could get out of a pledge was through divorce.

The NIV interprets the words a little to make more sense to the reader. The Greek says Joseph was a "just" man "but" did not want to expose Mary to public disgrace. Joseph was a law-abiding man, right with God. His justice echoed God's justice. If Mary had truly committed adultery, the just thing would be for her to be punished. Yet just like God, Joseph is merciful. He cares about Mary. He will not see her tarnished any further.

Scripture doesn't spell it out, but Joseph knows in his gut something is up. Mary is virtuous. That's why he chose to be married to her. To have betrayed his trust would be totally unlike her. He is trying to make the best of the situation, of this news that is just wrong in every way, news that doesn't make sense. Had Joseph gone through with it, it would have been a good plan. No one could have faulted his integrity or his mercy.

Then comes this dream. I'm sure he's had sleepless nights trying to come to grips with this, figuring out how to be right before God in the midst of all this. Then an angel of the Lord appears. I have to tell you, if I were Joseph, I'd be thinking, "Ah, finally, an angel. I'm glad to know my plans were wise. God is finally confirming my decision." Because that's what we often do, right? We make our plans and ask God to bless them. We want God to stand behind us and say, "Well done, good choice, I'm proud of you!"...no matter what it is we've chosen to do.

But the angel doesn't affirm Joseph's righteous decision. Instead, he says, "Don't be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." I can imagine Joseph in a dreamy stupor, "Yes, Lord, whatever..."

And then it hits him. "Waitaminute! I thought the news was bad before, and I made the best of it. But this news...that can't be right, can it?" Because Joseph had one plan, and that was to become Mary's husband and live happily ever after, no son of God, no angels intervening, nothing mystical or difficult or dangerous, just an ordinary life. That plan gets dashed by the wrong news, so he comes up with a new plan. Marry Mary, divorce her quietly, go on about life in a quiet way, be a good Jewish man, find someone else, it could work.

But this new plan...it's wrong too, isn't it? This baby is from the Holy Spirit? This is the messiah to come? I thought the messiah was supposed to save us from the Romans? Do we need saving from our sins instead? You mean I'm going to be responsible for raising Him as my own son? How do I raise the Son of God? How can I possibly live with this plan?

Yet this was what was prophesied through Isaiah. A “virgin will conceive one named Immanuel – God with us.” It is what God wanted. Not Joseph. It’s not according to his plan. It’s the wrong news according to the Jewish plan for a conquering hero, a messiah warrior who will appear out of nowhere and spew fire and brimstone across the Roman Empire. This is the wrong news for Mary, who will always be regarded as inferior by her contemporaries even as she becomes the bearer of God the Son. It is a scandal. Yet it is right. Joseph cannot deny it. By the time he awakes, he is ready. He does what was commanded of him. And by obeying the word of the Lord, he becomes the earthly father of the son of God.

The world and the gospel are upside down from one another. The world tells us that the Bible is full of the wrong news. Some preachers tell us that the Bible has got it wrong, too. Let’s compare the news of the world to the news of the Bible. The world says that you can make your own way, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, and do it yourself, that the addict has only to choose to get clean, that everything is a matter of the will. Jesus says that all those things are in His hands as He quotes, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon *me*, for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent *me* to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, *to release* the oppressed, *to proclaim* the year of the Lord’s favor.”

The world says to listen to those who are popular, those who entertain us – their wisdom is what matters. But the Bible says, “*The LORD* gives wisdom, and from *his* mouth come knowledge and understanding.” The world says that if there is a god, he is just a means to an end, the means to our happiness, our wealth, our greater enjoyment. God says, “*I* am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” God is not a means to an end; God is the end, the resolution to all those fruitless searches.

The world says power is found in the homes of the rich, of the influential, of the schemers and dreamers, the creators of technology and innovation. Jesus says, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave -- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” About Jesus it is sung, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was *slain*, to receive *power* and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”

All this news is wrong to the world...but it’s good for us. Here’s the beauty of the wrong news – Jesus was born to a peasant girl and brought up by a man who was not his flesh and blood. He was raised in a shack – an earthen brick shack, maybe, but not much by our standards. This was not an accident. This was not an “oops” on God’s part. He sent Jesus when He did, where He did, so we could relate to Him. We can’t imagine ever meeting the Queen of England or even our favorite television personality. But Jesus was someone who came precisely as He did to be among us – as His title indicates, “God with us.”

That’s one of the biggest scandals of Christmas...not that we would pursue God, but that God would relentlessly pursue us. That He would so want His children to be with Him in eternity that He would fix the rift in space and time, the rift of sin and justice and mercy, the one we created, at the cost of His own Son – not just in His death, but His life, coming as a nobody, an everyman...coming as the second Adam, the one who succeeded where the first failed. He proved He wants us with Him in eternity by spending an earthly lifetime with us in the flesh.

You can latch hold of Jesus. He is not distant but here, right now. By the Holy Spirit that placed Him in Mary's womb, we can know Him still today as Savior, King, Friend. He offers us salvation, hope, wisdom, truth, joy. If you have never started on the journey of faith and entrusted yourself to Him, do it today and learn that the wrong news is actually very, very right.

The scandal of Christmas, in this news that seemed very bad, something very good was up. God was up to something, something so good that it would lead a righteous man to marry a pregnant girl, believing the impossible, that a virgin would conceive and give birth to the King of Kings. That always has priority. That has eternal significance. But there is another lesson here for the everyday, a lesson for us about the wrong news we face on a regular basis.

The key to the news is a phrase that's repeated – Jesus' conception is the work of the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit's working, the news is as desperate as we imagine. It is the Holy Spirit acting that changes this from a story of betrayal and deception to one of innocence and righteousness. Because when the Holy Spirit is involved, things aren't what they seem. Suddenly, when we see through the lens of the Holy Spirit, things that were unfocused become clear; hazy lines become defined. Events may not change, but our perceptions do.

The wrong news haunts us every day. Could be the situation in Ferguson, Missouri. Could be the awful reports about Bill Cosby. Could be the power out in downtown Detroit. It could be someone's suffering, somebody's diagnosis, things that seem unfair or unwarranted, a lost pet or a job problem. Could be having to worship Saturday nights instead of Sundays in a facility that's hard to call our own. We could keep going, right?

We could be scandalized by all that bad news and shake our fists and say, "God, where are you in the midst of all this?" Or we can pray about that news. We can pray, "God, how is your Holy Spirit involved in this?" We may not see it, and God can and sometimes does choose to keep His ways hidden from us. But every single thing that happens in this world is permitted by the Holy Spirit – some things because He wants to work through them, some in spite of them, and some He wants to get us involved with personally.

The subtle difference is doubt. We often look at bad news as proof that God isn't there. But what if the bad news is what it is because God is there? Maybe some things are happening so that we'll react, so that we'll get up and do something about them, to be God's hands and feet where trouble is brewing. Maybe some things are happening so that we can show mercy, show compassion, give a meal, comfort the grieving, and heal the brokenhearted. Who knows? Only the Spirit. So let's be asking.

Knowing what the Spirit is up to doesn't necessarily make the task easier; it only reassures us that the task is right. I'm sure there were nights when Jesus was up crying and Mary was tired and Joseph was thinking, "Did I really have that dream?" It wasn't easy to pack up the family and run to Egypt when another dream came, as we'll talk about in a couple of weeks. The tasks God lays out for us are always hard. Looking for the Holy Spirit gives us clarity, not ease.

But when you look for the Holy Spirit, your outlook changes. Suddenly, the world takes on a different hue. In Hebrews 12:2, it says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus endured the cross for joy’s sake! Can you imagine anyone going to death willingly like Jesus did? It’s impossible to have that kind of outlook unless there’s joy behind it. Jesus saw what the Spirit was doing, knew what the Father was up to, and so He took every step right to Calvary for joy.

I am blessed to have you all for a congregation. We’ve been through a lot together, and I believe God is just getting started. In many ways, it will get harder, not easier, as we look to find a home where we can worship on Sunday mornings, where we can reach the local community, and make friends with those who need to hear about the love of Jesus. I challenge us because I know that God has made you able to handle the challenge.

You have joyfully stepped up to Operation Christmas Child and turkey dinners and Meal and a Movie nights and the food pantry with little reward in terms of greater attendance or people coming to declare their love for Jesus. God is working in the midst of your faithfulness. So when we are challenged, don’t take it as an attack on what you already do. God is moving us towards greater and greater discipleship.

Let’s have that outlook of Jesus in everything. When we don’t have a lot of people, let’s ask, “God, what are you doing in the hearts of the people who *are* here? And what people need to be here that I haven’t asked to come that the Holy Spirit is working on?” When we aren’t sure how to fund what we do so that poor aren’t poor and the oppressed aren’t oppressed because they’ve received help and hope through the gospel, let’s ask, “God, who is it Your Holy Spirit wants to bring alongside us in ministry?”

Just this week, a group connected with Covenant Evangelical Presbyterian Church in West Lafayette, IN pledged \$4,000 a year for the next three years to CrossWay. They get to bless us, we get to be a blessing to them, God works through us both – that’s the way God does things and ties us together in the church. Do I like fundraising? No! It’s a pain. Nobody likes asking for money. And yet when we do it with joy, people step up to the plate because they want to be a part of this! God didn’t fully fund us from inside because He’s calling people outside to do what they’ve been called to do – to give generously.

Friends, the best-sounding news that doesn’t have the Spirit’s hand on it is nothing. Leave it well enough alone. But even the worst-sounding news that has the Spirit’s writing scrawled across it is something that we should rejoice about. The scandal of Christmas includes the wrong news that turned out to be the best news of all. Let’s rejoice in that news. And let’s take a second look at the events of our lives that surround us, keeping watch for the work of the Spirit in our midst.