

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

MERRY CHRISTMAS!!

...And a Very Merry [Materialistic] Christmas to You!

(Matthew 1; Luke 2)

Introduction: Bah. Humbug! Indeed!!

So, here we are, seven days away from Christmas, and the thought prominent in many of our minds is: *"Will I be able to wrap up my shopping in time?"*

Now I am mostly finished with my shopping, but that's not saying much because I'm not much of a shopper (which is, actually, the understatement of the millennium). I am, though, grateful beyond words for my wife - who is an excellent shopper - and for the Internet.

And speaking of shopping - have you noticed how materialistic Christmas has gotten? It's been awhile since I've ranted and raved against Christmas materialism. And such a rant, I'm sure you'll agree, is long overdue. So, here goes...

Bashing Christmas materialism (what fun!)

I think it's just terrible how, every year, Christmas decorations go up at stores earlier and earlier?¹

Malls are decked with Christmas red and green right after the black and orange of Halloween - to avoid end of year red ink.

Every year we get fewer and fewer Christmas cards and more and more ads from retailers. All the ads are evidently paying off.

Gallup estimates that consumer spending will be way up this year over last. And, from my observation (that, mostly from a distance), all indicators agree: traffic is awful, parking lots are maxed out, stores are packed.

And when it comes to online shopping, Cyber Monday now rivals Black Friday as a boon for stores - and, of course, for Amazon.

Yes, in our culture the seasonal emphasis is almost wholly (not "holy") on the material.

The celebration of Christmas has devolved to such a low point that no less an authority than Pope Benedict XVI (in December, 2005) said, *"In today's consumer society, this time of the year unfortunately, suffers from a sort of [materialistic] commercial 'pollution' that threatens to alter its real spirit."*

And on and on we could go.

Christian bloggers rant and rave against Christmas materialism. And, while it is fun to join them, it's kind of like shooting fish in a barrel. It's not really sporting. It's just too easy, too much of a soft target.

And we would all agree that what we need to do is to get back to the *real* meaning of Christmas. You know, like in the movies.

Getting back to "the real meaning of Christmas"

With the help of Clarence, the angel, George Bailey discovers on a Christmas Eve that he really has lived "a wonderful life."
(The good folks of Bedford Falls discover the real meaning of Christmas when they help George out of jam.)

¹ Not all Americans have believed that Christmas was a day worth celebrating. The early Puritans believing that Christmas was a day tainted by heathenism, thought that we should work harder than ever on Christmas and not take the day off.

Dr. Seuss tells us that the Grinch couldn't steal Christmas, because Christmas is not just about "presents and ribbons and wrappings, tags and tinsel and trappings."

No, the Grinch discovered that Christmas came even without the packages, boxes or bags. Christmas means a little bit more - and the Grinch's heart grew three sizes when he "got it!"

Charles Dickens' masterpiece, "A Christmas Carol", has now been made into a dozen different films. The story is all about helping Ebenezer Scrooge find and celebrate "the real meaning of Christmas." And in the end, he does become a generous, giving person.

And, of course, those tender, sentimental Christmas movies from Bruce Willis ("Die Hard", parts 1-7) tell us that it is all about saving the world from the bad guys in as violent a way as possible.

These Christmas morality plays are fun and generally [somewhat] wholesome. And, they are at least better than the crush of consumerism we find in the malls.

But, the Christmas message promoted by retailers AND "It's a Wonderful Life" are both equally and completely wrong.

Both ways of observing Christmas miss the point by a mile. They just miss in different directions.

One (the buying frenzy, or what C.S. Lewis called "Xmas") takes Christmas and turns it into an opportunity for a commercial windfall. The other ("It's a Wonderful Life" *et al*), turns the message of Christmas into The Gospel of Nice.

But, when we turn to the New Testament and see the events surrounding the actual birth of Jesus, there is no possible association with commercialism and "niceness" is just as absent.

On to a more biblical materialistic Christmas...

At the same time, though, the Bible's Christmas narratives are very materialistic. From the shepherds' presence at the stables to the magi's journey across a desert to Herod's mad slaughter of the innocents, we might even say that they are "earthly."

So, what we need is a movement away from the sentimental mush of the Gospel of Nice and a movement away from commercialism coupled with a rush toward a strong and GODLY materialism.

To the complaint that Christmas has gotten too materialistic, I say, "Bah! Humbug!" Christmas, as we celebrate it, is nowhere near materialistic enough!²

This morning, we'll focus on one aspect of the arrival of Jesus that is exceptionally materialistic. That is the biblical teaching that Jesus was born to a woman who had never been intimate with a man.

Yes. When Jesus was born, His mother, Mary, was a virgin.

A VERY Materialistic Incarnation (Matthew 1:18; John 1:14)

The Bible's Teaching (Matthew 1:18-20; Luke 1:35)

Look at Matthew 1:18-20 and you will find a remarkable teaching. Matthew tells us that there was no human father involved in Jesus' conception.

[Matthew 1:18] 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. [19] And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly. [20] But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in

² My thought is not original. After deciding to champion a "materialistic Christmas", I ran across the blog of Richard Hall, a Methodist Minister in Wales, who writes, "The commercialism and materialism of Christmas is such a soft target, I almost wonder why we bother. If everyone agrees it's wrong (At last! Something the whole church can agree about!) why do we bother talking about it? I want to suggest that even in the materialism of a modern Christmas, there's a lesson for God's people if we are willing to hear it. Christmas is a supremely materialistic festival. We celebrate the fact that God took human flesh - became incarnate - and lived among his people. He did not enter the world as a glorious heavenly being. He came as a baby, doing all the things that babies do. Forget the sentimental carols and Christmas cards. If the Christian gospel means anything at all, it is that 'God is with us'".

a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; FOR THE CHILD WHO HAS BEEN CONCEIVED IN HER IS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. (emphasis added)

That's how Matthew tells it. In Luke's gospel, we read of a visit by an angel to tell Mary of her surprise pregnancy. Mary, who lived in the small town of Nazareth, is explicitly called a "virgin" - a woman who has never had sex. (And, no. The word does not mean "young woman.")

Gabriel told her that she - while still a virgin - would conceive and bear a son.

When Mary understandably expressed confusion, Gabriel explained, ***[Luke 1:35]...The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.***

Both Matthew and Luke are telling us that Jesus' mother, Mary, was a virgin when He was born.

In Defense of the Bible's Teaching of the Virgin Birth

Now, FYI, back in the early 20th century there was a rash of scholars³ who believed that the Gospel writers were intentionally writing mythology when they wrote what we have just read.

That is, they wanted to make "the Jesus legend" look more heroic, so they added to the lore by inventing a virgin birth narrative. (This was actually the teaching I received as a young person in the church my family attended in Dallas.)

As this teaching was gaining influence, a brilliant scholar named J. Gresham Machen, investigated the matter and wrote a book called [The Virgin Birth of Christ](#).⁴

In this amazingly thorough book Machen investigated Greek and Roman mythology to find out if there were parallels to those myths with the Gospels and to see if they influenced Matthew and Luke when they claimed that Jesus was born to a virgin.

Machen found that there is so much difference between the mythological streams and the Bible's story that there can be no link. The account of the Gospels is original and fresh and has all the marks of genuine history.⁵

Then, Machen explored the passages in Matthew and Luke in exhaustive detail. Based on what we know of secular history, he showed that there is great credibility for both accounts. Machen argued persuasively that both Matthew and Luke mean what they appear to mean: Jesus was conceived in the womb of the virgin, Mary.⁶

This doesn't mean that Jesus was born to a virgin. I'll get to that in a minute. But it does mean that there is no way to read the Bible honestly and avoid the fact that it teaches that Jesus was born to a virgin mother.

With the Bible's teaching established, I now want to take time to make the case for the virgin birth of Jesus. I am zeroing in on a very materialistic Christmas this year. And the virgin birth of Jesus is a vital material witness to the truth of our faith.

First, let's consider the virgin birth biologically.
The Virgin Birth Considered

Biologically

I'm not going to engage in heavy lifting when it comes to biological matters. As some of you know, I'm not very biological.

⁵ It is reported that there are legends of virgin-born children in ancient mythology. One Internet site claimed that there was a belief among some that Plato was virgin-born, but I found no corroborating evidence.

⁶ You can look in bookstores around town - Christian and otherwise - and you won't find many recent books written that argue the case that the Bible teaches the virgin birth of Jesus. That's because Machen's book ended the argument.

³ Included are Rudolph Bultmann, Albert Schweitzer, Harry Emerson Fosdick from the early 20th century. More recently John Shelby Spong.

⁴ J. Gresham Machen was what some people have regarded as the premier evangelical biblical scholar of the early 20th century.

At the same time, like you, I understand where babies come from. A husband and a wife come together. An egg and sperm unite.

That's conception. It defines the formation of a human being. The process moves along, according to plan, until a baby emerges from a mother's womb.

In Jesus' case, the process moved along quite nicely, too. But it began without a father providing sperm.

The Bible supplies almost no details here. Unlike Greek and Roman mythology, where the gods were constantly consorting with humans, Scripture never says or implies or hints that God had sexual relations with Mary.

It says that the Holy Spirit would ***"come upon [her]"*** and that ***"the power of the Most High would overshadow [her]."***⁷

There is great mystery here. What, exactly, joined with Mary's egg? And how did that happen? All we are told is that the agent of conception was not Joseph or any other man - and that it was God.

That's what the Bible teaches. Now, let's take a moment to consider what the virgin birth meant for Mary and Joseph, personally and socially.

I believe that the actions taken by Joseph gives one of the most compelling evidences for its truth.

Socially

JOSEPH'S ACTIONS ARE TESTIMONY TO THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Here is an engaged couple eagerly looking forward to their wedding day. We are probably correct to assume that Mary was quite

young. There are differing strands of tradition as to whether Joseph was just as young, or was quite a bit older. The Bible doesn't say.

At any rate, they were no doubt anxious to become husband and wife, to establish a home, to start a family. Then, out of the blue an angel's announcement upset the apple cart of their plans.

There is no question as to what Joseph suspected. He was a man and he assumed what any man would assume in his shoes. He had not been with his fiancée. She told him that she was with child. He assumed another man had been with her.

Matthew tells us, though (1:19), that Joseph was a righteous man. So, he planned to not publicly shame Mary. He planned to end the formal engagement secretly and as privately as possible.

I think it is clear that the likelihood of Mary having an affair with another man while she was engaged to Joseph is small. But, I am certain that Joseph's initial actions don't argue for a belief in a virgin birth, despite whatever Mary might have told him. His plan was to do what any man would do whose fiancée has been unfaithful. He was going to break off the engagement (or "divorce" her).

What he did next, though, was very unexpected. Overnight, he changed his mind, finalized the marriage, took Mary into his home, cared for her as a husband would take care of a wife - and slept in a separate bed until after Jesus was born.

What explains that course correction? I think that what the Bible tells us serves as the best explanation.

[Matthew 1:20] But when he had considered this (breaking off the engagement), ***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 the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. [21] "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."***

Only a revelation from God of a miracle of God could have convinced Joseph - who knew that he had not been with Mary - that

⁷ In medieval art, the organ of conception is typically represented as Mary's ear, in that she receives "the Word".

another man had not been with Mary and that her Baby was, in a unique sense, God's Son.

And there is one other strain of thought that lends credence to the truth of the virgin birth as we read it in the Bible. That is the state of Jewish culture in the first century.

JEWISH CULTURE IS TESTIMONY TO THE VIRGIN BIRTH

First century Jewish culture did not look like 2016 America. In some ways, that was good and in some ways, not so good.

Two thousand years ago, in a small, rural village in Galilee like Nazareth, there was a very strict moral code. Firm traditions were in place that regulated family, relationships, marriage, and sexual practices.

Some of the traditions were based on Scripture and some, likely, were not. Some honored God and some probably did not, but were more legalistic.

Among the biblical bases for Nazareth morality was an understanding that says sexual intimacy is to be reserved for the marriage bed. That's a God-honoring understanding and that's a very good thing. That is what people in Nazareth believed in Mary's day.

However, shaming those involved in an out-of-wedlock pregnancy was also, very likely, in place in ancient Nazareth. And that was - and is - not a good thing.

Here at Northwest we try hard to walk the fine line of being faithful to what the Bible teaches about sex AND being gracious toward those who find themselves in tough spots because they have strayed beyond what the Bible teaches.

Over the years, people here like people in many, many other churches, have offered loving support to women and to couples who find themselves, like Mary and Joseph, unmarried and pregnant.

It is our aim to lavish love and acceptance on the woman and on the couple and on the precious life in the mother's womb. The news of the arrival of a child is not a time for scorn or shame, but a time for celebration.

Supporting women and couples who are with child honors God who is the Author of all human life and is a great way to say, *"We love YOU and we love your baby!"*

At the same time, we also believe that the Bible is clear about sexual intimacy outside the protective wall of marriage. It's not God's will. It does damage.

God knew what He was doing when He established marriage as the only context for the ultimate expression of love and intimacy - sexual relations - between a man and a woman.

From all that I have read about life in first century Israel, news of the engaged-but-not-married Mary's pregnancy would have placed a permanent stigma on her and on Joseph and on Mary's baby.

The small, tight-knit, Law of Moses-centered village of Nazareth would have ostracized the couple. And it's not likely that family and friends would have believed either the couple's reports about angelic appearances or their claim that Mary was still a virgin.

Whatever good reputations in the community they had would have been ruined by the news. So, here's the deal.

First century authors (like Matthew and Luke) who were telling the story of Jesus so that people who read would believe in Him, would not have made up a story involving a charge of Jesus being conceived out of wedlock. That story would not have added to but detracted from Jesus' appeal.

So, the best explanation for why they told the story the way they told it - out of wedlock pregnancy included - is the simplest one.

It was true.

The virgin birth was a miracle - on the magnitude of a Red Sea parting. But it was a most inconvenient miracle and one that put both Joseph and Mary in a very bad light.

And, yet, from a biblical perspective, it was essential that Jesus should have been born to a virgin.

Theologically

For one thing, a claim that Jesus is divine requires the virgin birth. You and I can say that Jesus was fully God and fully man throughout His entire life only because of the virgin birth.

If he had been conceived in the same way every other baby is conceived, He might have been an amazing person, might have grown to be heroic, and might have done great things.

But He wouldn't be "*the Word made flesh.*" Only the virgin birth allows us to say that Jesus was the God-man.

As well, Jesus' sinlessness requires the virgin birth.

The Bible teaches that each person born into this world is infected with the disease of sin. Without exception.

All of us are sons and daughters of Adam and we inherit the disease of sin (sometimes called "the sin nature") from our parents.

Jesus was the lone exception to this rule because His conception was unique. His one-of-a-kind entrance into the world broke the pattern that was set in the Garden of Eden and that has been followed by every birth since Adam and Eve's kids were born.

Every child ever born has been born into Adam's family and is therefore a sinner, just as Adam was a sinner.

But Jesus wasn't born into Adam's family because Adam - or Adam's descendant, Joseph - wasn't His father. God was His father.

He was therefore sinless and is therefore able to offer Himself as a sinless sacrifice for your sins and mine.

Key Point: Everything we have seen today tells us that Christmas celebrates the miraculous conception of Jesus. He was born to a virgin mother, and that truth is essential to our faith.

Christmas is not all about:

- what our favorite movies insist it is all about;
- family and great meals;
- sentimentality and good feelings;
- shopping!

Christmas is all about God becoming one of us. And you can't get any more materialistic than that.

So, what is the punchline for our time together this Sunday before Christmas?

The "WHAT" of Christmas is, "*God became one of us*" and "*Emmanuel - God with us*" and "*the Word became flesh.*" SO WHAT? I'll suggest three "*So what's*" for our response to the message of Christmas.

A VERY Materialistic Response to the Incarnation

Give!

Right off the bat I'm going to suggest that our culture is on to something with its association of gift-giving and Christmas.

No. After all I've already said today, I'm not advocating consumerism or shop-till-you-drop-ism. But giving - sacrificial and intentional giving - is a great way to mimic the giving of God as seen in the event we celebrate each Christmas when He sent Jesus.

Your gift-buying may or may not be finished for the Christmas season. If so, more power to you! (and if it is, many, many people resent you greatly...)

But I suspect that each one of us could think of gifts we might give that would either bless people or further Jesus' Kingdom?

The Incarnation was VERY material. And a material contribution to bless people and to further Jesus' Kingdom work from your store of time, talent, and treasure will both bring you great joy and reward AND will honor the Lord.

Give - of your time, your money, your treasure, your energy - in honor of God's great gift of Jesus to you this Christmas.

If the first outworking of the truths of Christmas has to do with giving, the second one I would mention has to do with proclamation.

Proclaim!

Last Sunday we saw what an integral role John the Baptist, the man whose mission in life was to make ready the way of the Lord, had in proclaiming that Jesus was the Savior and Messiah. John is inextricably linked to the truth of *"the Word become flesh"*?

I wonder if the presence of John the Baptist in the first chapter of John's Gospel alerts us to the link between the truth of the Incarnation and bold proclamation.

One powerful way to put flesh on Christmas is to simply and boldly and clearly tell others about Jesus. There are people you know who need to know.

Who will you tell them about your Jesus? You will!

My final *"So what?"* of Christmas is an invitation to worship.

Worship!

When Jesus was a toddler, wise men from the east came to Bethlehem, bearing gifts for the king of Israel. When they saw Him with His mother, Mary, they fell to the ground and worshiped Him (Matthew 2:11)

Before that, on the eighth day of His life, Mary and Joseph brought Him to the Jerusalem temple to dedicate Him to God. During that visit, the widow, Ana, and the old man, Simeon, both worshiped and praised God when they saw Jesus. (Luke 2:25-38)

Before that, on the night of His birth, shepherds came in from the fields after the angels told them the great news - and worshiped the newborn Jesus in the stables.

And before that, when the angel brought news of her soon-to-come miraculous conception, Mary worshiped.

Today, will you join those who have gone before and worship the Baby born of a virgin, the Word become flesh?