

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(December 23, 2018)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Immanuel - God with Us

Our Meddlesome God

(Galatians 4:4-5; Matthew 1:18-25)

Study #3

Introduction: Getting involved (or not)...

I don't know about you, but I would never walk into my neighbor, Matt's home, without knocking first. That's just not done. Protocol demands that I knock and be invited in before entering.

Unless, of course, I'm leaving my house early in the morning and see flames shooting out from Matt's windows and I know that he and his family are all asleep inside.

In that case I would "break in" to his house by whatever means necessary without giving a second's thought to protocol.

Entering without knocking is rude in one case, legitimate rescue in the other.

My father-in-law, Bob Kerr, has always been about the best mechanic I've ever known. Over the years that I have been married to his daughter, Bob has been very helpful with advice and with some "hands-on" help with our cars.

He's also been extremely helpful over the phone, answering dozens of questions I've posed to him about carburetors, transmissions, fuel pumps, and such.

But he's never - not once - "butted in" with a comment about the sorry shape of his daughter's car, made fun of me for buying an incorrect repair part, or berated me for having botched a do-it-yourself job.

That would have been to meddle, and my father-in-law, bless his heart, has never meddled.

Parents are very thankful when a stranger throws their child to the ground IF that stranger is pushing the child out of the way of an oncoming car. That stranger wasn't meddling. He was saving a life.

An alcoholic may not appreciate it at the time, but that alcoholic's family is grateful to friends who stage an intervention to prompt change.

Depending on why an action is taken, outside involvement will be called *intervention* or *meddling*, *rescuing* or *interfering*.¹

The Apostle Paul says that when Jesus broke into human history two thousand years ago, it wasn't meddlesome or cosmic "butting in." It was a divine rescue from disaster.

Historians who study these things like to tell us that in terms of politics and culture, Jesus' arrival was perfect timing.

At the Perfect Time (Galatians 4:4-5)

[4] But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son born of a woman, born under the Law, [5] so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

OK. So, in what ways was Jesus' arrival timely?

¹ In a book written by Christian counselor Larry Crabb, is a story of a time when he and his wife were having dinner with good friends. Demonstrating how dangerous it is to get together with a counselor, socially - Larry noticed that the husband was being rude and insensitive to his wife. During the meal, Larry pointed this out. His advice wasn't asked for. It wasn't a counseling session. Intrusive? Meddling? Yes. But with a heart to help.

Politically

Roads

Well, the ancient Romans are famous for civil engineering feats never before seen. Many of these were military in nature. They built siege works and catapults, and battering rams for battle.

But the Romans also built hundreds of miles of high-quality roads that linked cities, which allowed the Gospel to spread more quickly than it would ever have without those roads.

Language

Plus, Rome's conquest of most of the Western world - and a good bit of the Eastern world - allowed for the Gospel to spread across the Empire by a common language, Greek, the language in which the whole New Testament was written.

Pax Romana

And, Rome's military might during the first century meant that there was peace.

When there is a biggest, baddest bully in the world - Rome - nobody rebels. And for three centuries following the life of Jesus, the Pax Romana provided an unprecedented time of peace that made for the relatively unimpeded spread of the Gospel.²

Sometimes, things work out so well, so seamlessly, that it's hard to miss God's fingerprints.

Like last Saturday night in Quillon, Chile, when Alex and Julie Mandes and I were enjoying an evening on the back porch of our hosts, Rod (an American from Minnesota) and his wife, Pelusa, a Chilleno.

At one point, we three guys took a breath from our discussion and heard Pelusa telling Julie that she was going to the doctor in a few days because of concern about a recent breast exam.

Of course, this conversation took place just a few short months after Julie had been diagnosed and treated for her own breast cancer.

Yep. It was perfect timing for Julie to be there for Pelusa. Just like Jesus' arrival was perfect timing.

Beyond politics, though, theologians believe that Paul was thinking about perfect timing in terms of God's plan for the world when he wrote, **[Galatians 4:4] When the time was right..**

Theologically

God's plan through the ages

Here's a quick and dirty history of the world with respect to methods God has used to redeem the fallen mess of humanity.

After the failure of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when they ate from the forbidden fruit, God responded by expelling them from the Garden, protecting the whole human race from further damage.

But people continued to sin, to the point that God regretted having ever made them. His solution was to send a flood and start over with a cleansed earth and the family of Noah. That didn't exactly solve the sin problem, either, because people continue to rebel against God.

Just a few centuries later, the people of the earth expressed that rebellious heart by gathering on the plains of Shinar to build a tower - the Tower of Babel - to reach to heaven.

At that point God's "deliverance" was to rescue them from this self-worship by confusing their languages - something that greatly embittered me against the first Babel-onians last week in Chile.

² It is also well-documented that paganism's decline and the widespread abandonment of the ancient Greek and Roman gods created a vacuum into which Christianity easily slid.

Sin continued after Babel, though, with people continuing their rebel ways, only now with the complication of different languages and cultures.

So, God established a nation - Israel - and gave them a set of Laws and sacrifices - the Mosaic Law - that would direct them to Himself and would direct them through life with wisdom and grace. His plan was that Israel, this transformed community, would be a light to the nations of the world.

But at every stage of Israel's development, they failed, too. They failed under Moses' leadership and then under the leadership of Joshua. They failed under the rule of the judges and they failed when the kings sat on the throne in Jerusalem.

In due time...

So, after every failure, God introduced something that would bring about a new "next": the flood, the tower of Babel, the Mosaic Law.

And, at the end of the repeatedly failed era of Law, at just the right time, God sent His FINAL "next" - Jesus.

Jesus' arrival at Bethlehem was perfect timing relative to God's work in the world.

A translated conversation I had at lunch during the pastor's conference in Chile proved to be great timing for me.

This pastor, a member of the Mapuche tribe (an indigenous tribe living in the mountains of Chile) had asked me some probing questions, which led me to share with him a very specific, personal challenge I was facing.

He listened as my words were translated to him. He told me, "Yo, también." He was going through exactly the same thing.

At supper on that same day I had another conversation with a second pastor along the exact same lines. I clearly saw God's work in giving me some much needed support from new friends in Quillon, Chile.

Again, perfect timing.

God has the ability to piece events together in such a way that we stand back in wonder at His sovereign wisdom.

I tell you about happenings in Chile, you think of events in your own life, we consider the arrival of Jesus - and are in awe at God's meddlesome ways. He is a lovingly intrusive God. He has perfect timing.

To which a certain young man living a couple of thousand years ago in the village of Nazareth might have said, "Oh really...?"

At a Most Inconvenient Time (Matthew 1:18-25)

Happily Ever After, Until... (v. 18a)

Great expectations! (v. 18a)

[18a] Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph...

In the first chapter of the first book of the New Testament, Matthew brings us into the story of an engaged couple: Joseph and Mary.³

And, yes, we are all aware that this may well have been an arranged marriage, which to 2018 Americans looks pretty weird.

But, arranged or not, Joseph and Mary would have felt much of the same eagerness and anticipation for married life that we do, today.

³ The first seventeen verses are crucial, as they give the royal genealogy tracing Jesus' line from Abraham all the way through the kings to Joseph, His supposed father. This is why the angel can refer to Joseph, later, as "son of David."

Joseph would have been busily working on a home for them to live in when they were officially married. Both would have been dreaming of doing life together, of oneness, of a family.

Those dreams came to a screeching halt as Matthew describes a “situation.”

A VERY disruptive pregnancy (v. 18b)

[18b]...when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit.

Without belaboring the point, for a woman to be with child before marriage in a small village like Nazareth in first century Israel, would have been extremely disruptive.

At that time there was a culturally agreed upon moral code, based on Moses’ Law, that forbade sexual intimacy outside of marriage. And, at least to all appearances, Joseph and Mary had broken that code.

Both of them would have been looked down upon, socially ostracized, and possibly punished.

Everyone in Nazareth would know of Mary’s condition. There were no secrets in Nazareth. (That was just the beauty and the price of being a part of a community, like a small, first-century, Jewish village, or like a small group in a church.)

While everyone would notice Mary’s growing belly, everyone also would have assumed that Joseph was the father.

That’s why Matthew’s added line is so important. Mary was with child ***“by the Holy Spirit.”*** Not Joseph.

If we look carefully at how the Greek New Testament conveys the news, we see more than that the Holy Spirit of God was the Agent of conception.

This pregnancy is *from* the Holy Spirit, like the gifts you give at Christmas are *from* you, given to bless. The idea is that this surprise pregnancy (a pregnancy that would lead to shame for Joseph and Mary) was God’s gracious gift.

Well, the glory and grace of the Holy Spirit’s gift was instantly lost on Joseph, as is clear from what follows.

Now, of course, Mary’s life was very disrupted by this pregnancy. Luke’s account revolves around how her conception upset her world.

Luke records Mary’s shock and confusion at the angel’s news AND he also speaks of her quick turn to submissive trust in God’s plan.

But I have reasons for wanting us to look to Matthew’s story this morning. Hopefully, those reasons will become clear shortly. But Matthew’s focus is on Joseph. And Joseph was clearly devastated.

A devastated Joseph (v. 19)

[19] And Joseph, her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.

Here, Matthew shows us the seriousness, the permanence, of a first-century Jewish engagement relationship.

Joseph and Mary weren’t formally married. But, to break off the engagement essentially involved a divorce. She wasn’t *really* Joseph’s wife, yet, but he’s called her husband.

And what makes an even more intimate point, Matthew refers to Joseph, not with the formal word for “husband” but with the word “man”. He is Mary’s “man”.⁴

Matthew also says that Joseph was ***“righteous”***. He was a devout, Law of Moses-obeying, God-fearing Jew. And since he was all that, he would do what needed to be done. He would divorce Mary.

⁴ That word is “suzugos”.

But, he was determined to divorce her privately and to figure out a way to divorce her that would somehow not “stigmatize” her.⁵

He knew people would assume that he was the father of Mary’s child. He knew that he was definitely NOT the father of Mary’s child.

He would not live the lie of pretending. But, he couldn’t bring himself to hurt Mary. He had every legal right to shame her, but he didn’t do it.

So, I don’t know how else to say this. Joseph loved Mary. And the news of Mary’s pregnancy washed over Joseph like a tsunami. It was overwhelming.

In 2010, there was a shifting of plates in the Pacific that created a tsunami that devastated the coastal area of Chile where the Abarcas were living.

This past week, we spent time in the fishing village of Cocholgue. As we walked the streets, Manuel would point to buildings hundreds of feet from the coastline that were destroyed when the tsunami wave came ashore. He told me that large, ocean-going ships and fishing trawlers were carried to the city’s main plaza.

Joseph was as overwhelmed by Mary’s news that she was with child as Cocholgue was by the tsunami.

While Joseph was trying to figure out how to carry out his divorcing plan, that plan was dashed as certainly as his hopes for a “happily-ever-after marriage” had been dashed.

Joseph’s Great Commission (vv. 20-23)

While he was sleeping...

We don’t know at what point Joseph became aware of Mary’s pregnancy.

It might have been very early on, before she left Nazareth to spend time with her relatives, Elizabeth (who was surprisingly pregnant with John the Baptist) and Zacharias, in the hill country of Judea. Or, it might have been when she returned after John’s birth.

But, at some point during the time that Joseph was mulling how to divorce Mary in a way that didn’t stigmatize her (!), he fell asleep.

This was a significant sleep because while he was sleeping, an angel from God appeared to him in a dream.

The angel’s message (vv. 20-21)

[20] But when he had considered this, 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.”

Let’s notice a couple of things here.

Son of David

The angel addressed Joseph with, “**son of David.**” Joseph was a direct descendant of every king who had ever sat on the throne in Jerusalem from David’s line. He was a true “**son of David.**”

But we wonder how often Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth who lived six hundred years after the last king of Israel and well over a thousand years after King David was referred to as “**Son of David.**” Probably not very often.

Fear not

The angel told him, “**Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife...**” - indicating that Joseph was afraid of taking that action.

Really? Afraid of what?

⁵ That is the literal meaning of the word we translate “disgrace.”

Well, he certainly would have been afraid of what people in his small village would think of him.

None of us enjoy being looked down on or being accused of would face in Nazareth from the scandal of Mary's pregnancy.

In addition, since he knew that he was not the father of the Child Mary was carrying, wouldn't he have feared that Mary loved someone else? I think that would be a pretty normal fear for a man whose fiancée is with child, but not by him.

But he need not fear that Mary's pregnancy was a signal that she was unfaithful or that she loved another. The angel's message confirmed what Mary may have already told him, that the Child in her womb was not conceived in the normal way. This conception was a gift *from* the Holy Spirit of God.

What a relief!

Yes, and while it would have been a relief, it wasn't a complete relief. Knowing the full situation didn't relieve Joseph of the burden of deciding how he would deal with his personal tsunami.

Let's take just a minute to put ourselves in Joseph's sandals and see if those sandals fit us.

Time to reflect on Joseph...on us...

Joseph knows that Mary's conception was from the Spirit of God. That didn't change the fact that people would look down on him, would think ill of him, and would assume something about him that wasn't true.

The angel says there is no need to fear. Anything. And, from what the angel also said, there was every reason to Joseph to be thoroughly jazzed.

Joseph, though not actually the father, is also not irrelevant. He will play the fathering role in the life of this Child.

That is clear by the command for Joseph to name the Child, *Jesus*. (Joshua/Savior). In a Jewish home, the father always named the child.

This - get married to Mary, raise Jesus as if He was his own - was Joseph's Great Commission.

You and I have a Great Commission. We are to make disciples. We are to take next steps with Jesus AND we are to help others take their own next steps with Jesus.

There are aspects of our Great Commission that are delightful.

There aren't many things in life sweeter than pouring ourselves into someone who is taking their first steps with Jesus. It is sheer joy to tell someone the life-changing stories of Jesus for the first time. Helping someone grow as a disciple, turn from sin, walk in holiness IS a huge part of the abundant life Jesus offers.

But...

All of that involves investing the finite resources of time, energy, and treasure into that person. It will require less time surfing the Internet and watching Netflix originals. Disciple-making costs.

Disciple-making is about denying self, risking rejection, and experiencing disappointment.

In some parts of the world, living as a "discipling disciple" means losing a job, rejection, physical danger, and hardship for your family.

Joseph's Great Commission would involve negatives, too, as we have seen.

But, he would have the unparalleled privilege of teaching the Messiah how to walk and talk. He would teach God's only begotten Son to obey Moses' Law. He would be the one Jesus would call "Dad" until He began to understand that His true Father was in Heaven.

You and I have a choice to make when it comes to obeying Jesus' Great Commission or not. We weigh whether to obey God or not; live Jesus' abundant life or not; count the cost and reap the reward of obedience or not.

I wonder what went through Joseph's mind as he woke up, having heard the angel's message in his dream?

Did he shake himself awake, take stock of the situation, weigh the options, and consider whether he would obey his own Great Commission to be Jesus' earthly father figure?

What if Joseph were to say, "NO!"?

Saying "No" would spare him so much hardship, avoid so much shame, make life so much easier. And saying "No" would force him to miss so much joy. "No" would shut the door on having a stake in developing God's Messiah.

With those plusses and minuses at stake, listen as Matthew tells us what was Joseph's decision.

Joseph's Life-Affirming "Yes!" (vv. 24-25)

[24] And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, [25] but kept her a virgin⁶ until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.

Instant obedience. He took Mary as his wife, but, as the verse says, not fully. His primary and first role as husband to Mary was to safeguard her Child.

And he faithfully fulfilled the role of a father for a Child he knew wasn't his when he named Him just what the angel told him to name Him: Jesus. Savior.

This morning, two days before Christmas, let's see what Joseph's story has to say to us.

First, there is something here about tsunamis.

Conclusion:

When tsunamis hit, learn from Joseph and keep God's larger story in mind

Tsunamis happen, as Cocholgue, Chile learned in 2010. Houston and the rest of the Texas coast has learned about hurricanes, and you know about earthquakes, too.

These disruptions come in all shapes and sizes and include family crisis, sobering news from a doctor, job loss, and relational fracture with a friend.

These storms are a part of life in our broken world.

They are the storms that come out of nowhere. They happen at the most inopportune moments. And God knows that.

When your tsunami hits, remember Joseph, Jesus' step-father.

Joseph did the math and figured that living out God's unique Great Commission for him was incalculably more valuable than the safety of disobedience.

So, he took Mary as his wife, knowing that a lifetime of rejection AND glory was ahead of him.

What has come your way - or mine - might seem to be incredibly poor timing. But watch. Your painful story may be just the thing that will put you at the center of the larger, redemptive story God is telling.

Open your eyes to the ways your life's disruption might move God's eternal purposes forward.

⁶ Literally "*did not know her*", a standard biblical euphemism for sexual intercourse.

One hundred and fifty years from now, you will look back at 2018-19 and rejoice that you walked with God during the storm.

Through the eyes of faith we can even see today that there is nothing like being a part of God's larger story, just like Joseph.

And, of course, we are grateful to God today for the birth we celebrate.

Thank God for the tsunami that changed Joseph's world - and ours!

[Matthew 1:22] Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: [23] Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which translated means, "God with us."

Throughout history there have been those who have believed that God does not intervene. He is not the meddling type. People who believe such things are called "deists."

Deists believe that God is a "hands-off" God. Deists say that the world is like a spring left to unwind on its own. We, the people in the world, are pretty much on our own.

God got things rolling and He's given principles to guide us and truths to lead us but He doesn't interfere and He doesn't intervene. He doesn't meddle.

That's deism. And Christmas puts the lie of deism to rest.

He intervened. Our God is a meddling God. He is today and He was in the days when Quirinius was governor of Syria and Caesar Augustus ordered a census of the whole inhabited earth. (Luke 2)

At that time, ***[4]...when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son born of a woman, born under the Law,[5] so that He might redeem those who were under the Law...that we might become the adopted daughters and sons of God.***

Today, we worship God because of the ways in which He has intervened in history from the beginning up until today. Most powerfully in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And in His disruptive birth.

Have a very Jesus-filled, very Merry Christmas!