

**Matthew 1:18-25** This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. His mother, Mary, was pledged in marriage to Joseph. Before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Joseph, her husband, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her. So he decided to divorce her privately. <sup>20</sup>But as he was considering these things, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>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.”

<sup>22</sup>All this happened to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup>“Look, the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son. And they will name him Immanuel,” which means, “God with us.”

<sup>24</sup>When Joseph woke up from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him. He took Mary home as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but he was not intimate with her until she gave birth to her firstborn son. And he named him Jesus.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. Christmas is just a couple days away, but have you ever really thought about Jesus’ birth and the circumstances surrounding it? Have you ever put yourself in Joseph or Mary’s sandals and pondered what it must have been like to deal with it all? What Matthew describes on these pages of Scripture — we might come away from it all thinking, “What a mess!”

This is the, at least at Christmas, often overlooked outcome or consequence of Jesus becoming our Savior, of God becoming man, or as his name Immanuel declares: God literally, physically, dwelling with us. He was with us *in* our sinful mess. But he was also with us *for* our salvation.

**This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place.** How would you have written the story? What kind of circumstances would you have had Jesus be born into? Good things, no doubt. Certainly the Christ should be born into an affluent family known for its royalty and influence. It should begin in a modern town, at least for the time, where the Savior could be born in relative comfort and a measure of cleanliness. Obvious circumstances for an obvious king. And if it had happened like that, we’d say, of course it did. That’s how it should have happened. But it didn’t.

The parents God chose for his Son, Mary and Joseph, were poor. They lived in a small village far away from the City of David, the Capital, Jerusalem, and far from any city of size. They were not even married yet. And before they *were* married, Mary was *found* to be pregnant. Found by who? Everyone! Her parents, her family, her relatives. The people of the small town of Nazareth — everyone knew. And no doubt as happens in small towns when everyone knows something — they talked about it. They gave their opinions. They passed their judgments. And in those days a child conceived out of wedlock was seen a *scandalous* thing. The law allowed for such a woman to be stoned to death! And normally it *was* scandalous and shameful, and is still. But this was *God’s* Son, conceived by *his* will according to *his* plan. Try telling that to mom and dad. Try telling that to the gossipers of a small town, of any town. Try telling that to Joseph, who had already decided to break off the engagement, to divorce her quietly.

**This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place.** Really? What a mess! As much as we like to romanticize our Savior’s birth, to focus so much on our joy and happiness and our nostalgia and merriment this time of year, the actual account of Jesus’ birth says, “Hold on a minute. Don’t take it so lightly.” From the outset Jesus was immersed in a messed up world of *our* creation, our sin. Why did people jump to conclusions about Mary? Why did it *look* so bad? It wasn’t the first time someone turned up pregnant outside of marriage. It wasn’t the first time someone ran with a piece of juicy gossip and told everyone without all the facts. It wasn’t the first time God’s plan was failed to be believed by so many.

Jesus’ birth came in the midst of thousands of years of sinful people doing sinful things. And as we celebrate it this week 2000 years later, things have not changed.

The world is still just as messed up. Our lives are just as messy as theirs. Sin infects us all. Sin affects us all. We deal with its *consequences* every single day we are alive with every sinful thought, word, or action we think, say, or do.

And we deserve to deal with its *punishment* every single day after this life, in death — to be separated from God because of our messy, sinful lives, to be cast out of his presence forever in hell.

But doesn't it make you feel better that Jesus endured this messy world too? God with us. Misery loves company, right? You'd think it would, but it doesn't lessen the suffering one bit. No, if Jesus was just a man enduring this messy, sinful world with us, that doesn't help very much, at all. No, when we are in misery we want someone to take the misery away so that we don't have to deal with it anymore. And *that's* what Jesus did. That's why he came, not just to be with us in our mess, but to be with us for our salvation.

Nothing about Jesus' birth was sinful, shameful, or scandalous. **This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place** to fulfill what Isaiah said in our first reading. **The virgin will be with child and give birth to a Son.**

Mary and Joseph weren't married yet — they had had no relations. The baby in Mary's womb *was* from the Holy Spirit. Had Mary and Joseph been married and living in the same home with an established relationship or family, the virgin birth would be in doubt. But Matthew makes it clear that there is no doubt. He even goes so far to say that nothing "went on" between Mary and Joseph until *after* Jesus was born.

That Jesus was born amidst what appeared to be scandalous and shameful circumstances, it was all a part of God's plan. Being true God meant that he was perfect. As he dwelled with us in our sinful world — with us in our mess! he himself never sinned. He was our perfect substitute, keeping every single one of God's commands perfectly for us, in our place — with us for our salvation.

Being true man meant that he could die — with us in our mess. But being true God meant that his death counted for us — his holy, precious, blood paid for the sins of the world — with us for our salvation.

His death was real! He was buried in the ground — with us in our mess. But God raised him from the dead on the third day, the first of all who will rise on the last day — with us for our salvation.

What mess do you find yourself in today? Is it your health? Is it the people around you? Is it a particular sin, or no sin in particular that the devil won't let you forget? Even if it's something that only you know about, only you know you are enduring — whatever mess you're in, and this life is messy for all of us, you are not alone.

And I don't say that as a throw away phrase to make you feel better because, hey, everyone is suffering. I say "you are not alone" because

Christmas reminds us that *you* are *not* alone. Immanuel, God with us. He's with you in your mess — he suffered the worst that this world has to offer, the worst that you and I have to offer. He took it all on himself and went from that manger to the cross, suffered in our place a suffering that makes all other suffering temporary. Because his journey didn't end there at the cross. Jesus' tomb, wherever it is, remains empty to this day.

Though his birth was over 2000 years ago, still he is alive. Still he lives to remind you that he's with you in your suffering and with you for your salvation. Your sins are forgiven. You are one with Christ and with God. Eternal life in heaven is yours.

All because of that great message at Christmas: Immanuel — God with us. Our closing hymn today is one we've never sung, but it proclaims wonderfully the meaning of "God with us."

*He whom the sea And wind obey  
Comes down to serve the sinner in great meekness.  
Now God's own Son With us is one  
And joins us and our children in our weakness.*

*Dear Christian friend, On him depend;  
Be of good cheer and let no sorrow move you.  
For God's own child In mercy mild  
Joins you to him—how greatly God must love you!*

May this be our focus this week as we celebrate again our Savior's birth. May it fill us with joy and happiness, but more than that, with awe and wonderment, that God is with us — in our mess, and for our salvation. In Jesus' name, Amen!