



Roanoke, Virginia

December 3, 2023

“Jesus’ Birth Certificate: (Name)”

Advent Sermon Series Part I

Matthew 1:18-25

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A tradition in my house is that on a daughter’s birthday, we tell the story of her birth. They so enjoy hearing these stories that I decided to ask *my* mom to tell me about the day I was born.

Mom, what do you remember about the day I was born?

I don’t remember anything.

What? Nothing?

No, not really.

Can you remember going to the hospital, or if it was a long labor?

No.

Can you remember whether it was daytime or nighttime?

No, I can’t remember that either.

You don’t remember anything?

Honey, I had three boys born a year apart from each other. I can remember being in labor, being in a hospital room, holding babies, but I don’t remember which one was which.

(Uh). I so wanted to hear about how she felt when she held me for the first time or what I looked like through the tears of joy in her eyes... ,



...but I have to admit she has a point. I probably wouldn't remember much, if anything, if I were in her place. I was one of seven children and, as she said, was the last of a run of three boys born one after another. Besides, I'll take what she doesn't remember over what my father does remember. He said that when he saw me he thought, "How can a baby's head be as big as his body?"

I am not without details about my birth, however. When mom couldn't remember any details, I remembered that I have a copy of my birth certificate. Birth certificates are handy things. I already knew I was born in Bambridge, GA on May 20, 19-something. But my certificate also lets me know that I was born at Riverside Hospital at 9:17 pm..., which means, if you add the hours up, I am almost 7 days younger than Millie who was born just after midnight on May 14. And if I became suspicious as to why my mother didn't remember me being born, her name and my dad's name on the certificate put to rest any thought that I might have been adopted which would have explained why dad is good at math and mom is good at counting cards and I am neither. Now I have an explanation as to why I have a terrible memory. I inherited that from my mother.

A birth certificate offers specifics. It illustrates that each child is unique and particular.

Birth certificates were not required in Jesus' day, but let's be clear about just how specific Jesus' birth was.

He...

wasn't born everywhere,

but somewhere;

not at all times

but on a specific date;

not as a child in every family,

but as a child in a particular family.

F. Dale Bruner called it the "scandal of particularity" and Paul called it a "scandal to the Greeks." He called out the Greeks because they, as the people of philosophy, had a hard time imagining the God of eternity living a particular human life, in a particular time, in a particular place.

Matthew's Gospel doesn't hide from the scandal of particularity but instead *magnifies* it by bringing a cultural scandal into the conversation. Listen for what I mean, and listen for the Word of God:

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to (leave) her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:



²³“Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “[God is with us.](#)” ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

The Word of the Lord!
[Thanks be to God!](#)

A very *specific* Word of the Lord, don’t you think?

Our Advent Sermon Series will be about specifics. The sermons will fill in the blanks on an imaginary birth certificate.

Today, we fill in the baby’s name. The baby’s *given* name, not the baby’s *nickname*. You heard the passage provide both. Nicknames often are more descriptive of a person than a legal name because there is usually something about a person that inspires it. Lefty Driesell is, of course, left-handed. Stonewall Jackson was called Stonewall because of his stubborn courage at Bull Run. My sister, Scotty, was born in Scotland.

Those nicknames are given in hindsight. The prophet Isaiah gives Jesus a nickname in foresight, anticipating what Jesus will become. “Emmanuel,” means “God with Us.” The nickname fits because the Matthew goes to tell how Jesus lives up to that nickname.

- His teachings will reveal God’s will.
- His actions will reveal God’s justice, compassion, and love.
- His life and death will be the means by which God’s light will shine.

Those who get to know the adult Jesus and become a part of the early church will say, “[When we got to know Jesus, we got to know God. He was *God with us.*](#)”

But that’s later. You don’t put nicknames on birth certificates. Let’s put a formal name on the certificate, and in that day the most formal way someone was introduced was not only by name but also by relationship. So, let’s imagine Joseph answering the question, “[What is the child’s name?](#)” in this way: “[Yeshua Ben Yosef,](#)” or “[Jesus, Son of Joseph.](#)”

Our imagining Joseph answering in this way honors the spirit of the passage and the glory of Joseph. The glory of Joseph is that despite his and Mary’s reputation being opened to question, he adopts his fiancé’s child that is not his own. He does what is right after being tempted to do what is righteous in the world’s eyes.

Another way of putting this is that Joseph, as a righteous man, is led by God’s Spirit to do what Jesus will later ask other righteous people to do. Joseph is asked to *reconsider what being righteous really means*. When he first hears that Mary is pregnant, and knows that he is not the father, he vows to do what he *thinks* is righteous—what his culture tells him is righteous. He thinks that the right thing to do is help Mary and, no doubt himself, save face by separating from Mary and quietly leaving the scene.



This is the righteousness of culturally accepted norms. I say that without disdain because culturally accepted norms are what give stability to communities and hold them together. When we abandon norms of decency and protocol, institutions, communities and even nations can fall apart. Following *Roberts Rules of Order* has been a great blessing for many meetings that could easily have dissolved into personal and hurtful chaos. But socially accepted norms are not always healthy...; and even when they are, they need to be reconsidered from time to time. Sometimes, *true* righteousness is doing what needs to be done even when deemed wrong by those considered righteous. Joseph hears in his dream that he is to marry his fiancé even when so many would tell him to leave. Maybe in the glow of the Christmas season, it is easy to say Joseph did the right thing, but it could not have been easy if it took a powerful vision to change Joseph's mind. But Joseph does change his mind and does the right thing even if the righteous might condemn it.

It turns out that Jesus grows up to be a chip off the old block. The father is seen in the son. You've heard that said about Jesus many times, but I bet the Father talked about was nearly always God the Father. Well Jesus will not only bear the image of his father in heaven, he will also bear the image of his adoptive father on earth. Jesus will be the adult who will do what is right even when righteous people tell him it is wrong. He will:

- welcome the company of the condemned,
- include the company of the excluded,
- and touch those deemed untouchable.

Over and over again, he will do what is right and loving for the moment and the person in front of him, and some of the righteous of his day will

- question him,
- then argue with him,
- then condemn him,
- and finally call for his death.

Jesus will die as a condemned criminal. He will sacrifice his reputation as being righteous for the sake of what is right.

But that's jumping ahead to Lent. Let's stay in the first Sunday of Advent and consider again what Joseph does. Joseph trusts God's voice in his life. He trusts that it is God's Spirit who is bringing this child into the world, and he trusts that it is God's Spirit who is bringing Jesus into his life. He does what God asks him to do:

- claim Mary as his wife
- and claim Jesus as his son.

He brings Jesus into his family and life even if it is at the cost of his reputation.

And he does it all *without talking about it*.



At least that is how Matthew's Gospel presents Joseph. Nowhere in Matthew's Gospel—or any of the Gospels for that matter—do we ever hear Joseph saying anything. He is not quoted even once. He is remembered not for what he says but for what he does, and that is why we honor him.

In that sense, I suggest that Joseph is a particularly important guiding light for us Christians and this congregation in this age of virtue-signaling which we might think of as righteousness posturing. It is popular today to prove one's virtue by letting the world know where you stand and whose side you are on. It is buying into the world's myth that we will be saved by our works—that we will be able to figure out life's problems and eradicate evil through our best efforts. But tyrannies are born from selling this kind of mythology.

Joseph, if properly understood, would be out of favor in our day because he knows what his culture expects of him if he is going to be considered righteous. He knows his crowd—the crowd that would support him leaving Mary is the crowd that might look down on him if he didn't.

- I see Joseph in those who act in the best interests of their loved ones,
 - even when their loved ones don't like it or agree with it.
- I see Joseph in those at work who insist on what is ethical
 - even when others around them insist that the profit-end justifies the unethical means.
- I see Joseph in government leaders who, when it really counts,
 - go against their party to say what is true and do what is right.
- I see Joseph in Palestinians who condemn terrorism
 - and Jews who work for Palestinian rights.
- I see Joseph in those who do what needs to be done in leaving abusive spouses
 - and those who have good reason to stay with their spouses when others thought they should leave because they had been betrayed.

Joseph's willingness to sacrifice his righteous reputation is a willingness to lose his life. But it is also his finding it. One could even call it his salvation. I am not talking about eternal salvation but rather Joseph being saved within his life by gaining a son he otherwise would have lost and a wife he was tempted to leave. I see him serving the greater good of the world by raising and protecting this son he and Mary share. By doing what he does, he takes God into his home, his family, and his life.

Which brings me to what the name "Jesus" means. I told you already that his nickname, Emmanuel, means "[God With Us](#)." Well, Jesus means "God Saves." When Joseph names his son Jesus, he does so not only because an angel told him to do so, but because he trusts *the truth of the name*. The truth of the dream of night is now the truth of daylight. The righteous do not have the power to save, even when they claim they do by telling you their truth and promote their program. Joseph adopts the truth: *God* saves.

