

Kailua Christian Church
Christmas Sunday Worship Service
December 25, 2022
Sermon: "The Nearness of God"
Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25
Rev. James Kwong

Scriptures: Matthew 1:18-25 NIV Joseph Accepts Jesus as His Son

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about^[a]: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet^[a] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰But 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. ²¹She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus,^[a] because he will save his people from their sins."

²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"^[a] (which means "God with us").

²⁴When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

SERMON

Good morning, Kailua Christian Church, and Merry Christmas! This morning, we will look at the Matthew passage of the Christmas story and learn just what was so special about Jesus' birth over 2,000 years ago.

Jesus' birth brings us near to God through a spiritual reconciliation that takes place because of his death on the cross. In other words, Jesus makes it possible for our spiritual status to be changed. One of the greatest aspects of Christmas is the idea that Jesus brings hope. One of the most difficult parts of Christmas for many people is when loved ones have passed. It can be hard to celebrate when you miss the things mom used to say or the things dad used to do. Grief is not something that we will ever fully get over. We experience loss and pain in ups and downs like an ocean tide. If you've ever been out on the sea, the distances to land can be deceiving. It is even more disorienting when you can't see anything around but water. Losing your bearings can drive you mad because you don't know which direction to sail or swim. You feel hopeless. That's what is so important about the hope that Jesus brings. When Jesus was born, it was a sign to all people that God had not forgotten the depths, the dark places, that humanity was in.

To fully appreciate the first Christmas, you have to understand what was happening to Israel before Christ's birth. When Israel was first assembled into a kingdom, God had promised the people that He would be their God if they would be his people. They were to follow his commands and worship Him only. They were to remain set apart from the people

that surrounded them and not to worship the false gods that they worshiped. When Israel broke the agreement and worshiped other gods, God would discipline them. He allowed other countries to attack Israel: a scenario that reminded them to trust God and be obedient to Him. God is very patient.

After several hundred years of waiting for his people to be obedient, God eventually put them on a time-out. He allowed Babylon to invade Judah and take the people captive to live in a foreign land. For several generations, they lived in a pagan land surrounded by idol worship. They had to fight just to preserve a sense of identity - both nationally and spiritually. This is how the Pharisees came about - they started schools called synagogues to teach the young people what it meant to be Jewish. They taught God's Word from the Hebrew scriptures. They taught the language, customs, and their history so that the next generation would know who their God was.

God helped these exiles return to their land in three waves starting 80 years later. When they returned, they were able to inhabit the land again and rebuild the temple for worship. But, significantly, the shekinah glory never inhabited the temple again. God was silent for almost 400 years. Can you imagine how far away they must have felt from God? Eventually, Alexander the Great conquered the whole of the known world, and the Roman empire soon came to power after that. Each new empire that arose would tax the Jews and oppress the people.

In the midst of all of this, God never forgot his people. He allowed his people to experience brokenness. Like a wayward child, Israel had to be disciplined. But discipline is a necessary aspect of showing love. God demonstrated love by disciplining his people. Sometimes, we have to be disciplined. Sometimes, in our lives, we aren't ready for change until we hit rock bottom. Well, God reached out to Israel in her darkest time to save her from her sin. If you have your Bibles, please turn to Matthew 1:18-25. Verse 21 tells us Jesus' purpose: He came to save his people from their sins. Verse 23 shows us that this moment was foretold by the prophet Isaiah 500 years earlier. He knew that his people would have to suffer, but He never left them. Instead, He came down to them, in the form of a newly born baby. God became a man, and it's fitting that He was called Immanuel, "God with us." God chose to dwell among his people. He became one of us. He lived a perfect, sinless life. By doing so, He was able to include us in a heavenly inheritance. The gates of heaven are no barrier for those who follow Jesus. While He walked on the earth, He loved people just like you and me, and He taught them how to follow God. God reached out to Israel in her darkest time to save her from her sin.

God reaches out to us in our darkest times to save us from our sins. Romans 5:6-11 says, *"For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by his blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation."* Trusting in Jesus means we have a future and a hope.

Look back at Matthew 1. When Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, he didn't know what to do. Legally and culturally, he could have had her stoned. But Joseph was a righteous man! God helped him in his worst predicament: He sent an angel to allay his fears and put him on the right course. That must have been a relief! God has already rescued many of us from our sin. You were on a destructive path, but God saved you. Then, He shows us how to live as his disciples. In Matthew 10:7-8, Jesus gives his disciples the

command to compassionately meet needs and proclaim the verbal message of the gospel. He saves us, and then He gives us a new purpose in life: to help save as many people around us as possible before we die. Your neighbor? Your coworker? Your friend? Your kids' friends or family? Who is God calling you to share this hope with today? Everybody needs to be rescued, but who's going to help them? What will happen to our world if everybody says, "Not me."? He wants to use you to help the people around you experience his hope today. Don't wait for tomorrow because tomorrow may never come. Let the past losses of loved ones we have already experienced remind us to do what is right now before it is too late for others who are still alive. God reaches out to us and people all around us in our darkest times to save us from our sins.

God draws near to us, "Immanuel," to remind us of our need to repent from sin. Israel's sin was idolatry - trusting in other gods, other people, or other powers for deliverance. Take a look at 2 Kings 17:7ff. You know how you live a long life, you learn many life lessons, and you want to leave a legacy of wisdom and experiences so other people, especially the ones you love, won't make the same mistakes you made? That's exactly what the author of 2 Kings is saying here: look at the example of Israel and learn how to do it right instead! Israel fell as a nation because they sinned against God: they worshiped other gods, they walked in the customs of the nations around them, and they did evil things in secret against the Lord their God. Their evil provoked the Lord even though He warned them not to do these things. Doesn't this sound exactly like us? Our sin is idolatry - trusting in ourselves, our power, or other people for our own satisfaction. Matthew 6:33 reminds us to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. How many times have we sought to fulfill our own desires before even considering what God wants in our lives? If Jesus were to appear right now, we would simultaneously do two things: we would worship Him (or reject Him) and we would immediately become aware of our sin. When God reveals Himself in the Bible, people immediately become aware of their sin. Moses and the burning bush, the angel appearing to Manoah, Samson's father (Manoah tells his wife hysterically, "We have seen God; we will surely die!"), the angel appearing to Isaiah, etc. Have you ever been out somewhere and then realized that you're going somewhere that you're not really dressed for? But there's no time to go home and change. You show up but feel horribly self-conscious and under-dressed? That's the part of God's presence that makes people feel uncomfortable: God's presence reminds them of their sin. Like the Israelites, we hide our sin. We don't want anyone to know we have a sin problem. But take comfort! We all have it. We all need God's saving grace. Only the proud or the foolish deny their sin problem. If you don't deal with the sin problem, you miss out on every blessing God has for you. As Christians, we are well-adjusted: we know we have sin, we admit we have sin, we experience forgiveness, and we live as redeemed people. No child likes getting busted for doing something wrong. But everyone remembers what it feels like to make things right and get that hug afterwards. When you follow Jesus, you live just like you've gotten the hug! This Christmas, take an important moment to remember that God draws near to remind us of our need to repent from sin.

God draws near to us, but we also need to draw near to God. How do we do this? We draw near to God by receiving the gift of Jesus. Jesus died for us so that we don't have to be separated from God for all eternity when we die. 1 Peter 3:18 says, "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit;" If you feel dead inside, Christ came to give you new life! Romans 6:23 says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." God makes the gift of eternal life available to everyone - no one is left out or forgotten.

When we receive Jesus' gift and choose to follow Him, our spiritual status is changed. For the future: we will have a new address (from hell to heaven); we will have a new nature

(from sinful to redeemed); and we will have a new name (old body/name to new body/name). In the present: we have the promise of his eternal presence (God sends the Holy Spirit to be with us; we will never be alone again.); we have the promise of his power (victory over sin for you and so you can help the people around you); we have the promise of his people (you can belong to God's people, the church, and find the place where you belong); and we have the promise of his purpose (God reveals our job in his mission to advance his kingdom on the earth.). These things are all part of receiving the gift of Jesus. It's like all the things the car dealership tells you comes with the purchase of a new car: a service plan, roadside assistance, an extended warranty, and that new car smell. One thing's for sure: living with Jesus is the ride of a lifetime!

We draw near to God by giving our very lives as a gift back to God. Have you ever been to a Christmas party and they have that gift exchange? Sometimes, it's a white elephant (that's always fun) gift exchange. Have you ever been a little bit anxious because you aren't quite sure if the gift you brought will be good enough for someone else? You see someone get your gift; they unwrap it; they see it....and...either excitement (YES!) or disappointment (UGH!). You might think what kind of gift could we give God? I mean He really is the guy who's got everything, right?! We have the one thing that God wants but never forces us to give Him: our lives. The first thing we have to do with our lives is make things right with other people. In Matthew 5:22-24, Jesus taught that we have to make things right with others even before we present our offering at the altar. Correct worship requires restored relationships with people. Romans 12:18 says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you,, be at peace with all men." Righteous worship requires righteous relationships. It's a precious peace knowing that you've done everything you can possibly do to make things right between you and other people. In our Matthew story, Joseph was such a person. Because he was righteous, he sought to do the right things, all of the time. We make things right with people before we approach the altar.

We make things right with God through the sacrifice of our very lives. Romans 12:1-2 tells us that we are to present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. Mary, the mother of Jesus, did this very thing. She yielded to God's plan. She said "yes" to God and became a blessing to everyone because of her obedience. "Sacrificing our lives" means we listen to God's voice through his Holy Spirit, and we prepare ourselves to say "yes" to whatever He asks us. It's harder than it sounds: "Spend time with your kids." "Yes, Lord." "Tell your wife you love her." "Yes, Lord." "Wash the dishes." "Yes, Lord." "Clean up the yard." "Yes, Lord." "Talk to someone new at church." "Yes, Lord." "Invite a friend to church." "Yes, Lord." "Visit the elderly." "Yes, Lord." "Help someone less fortunate." "Yes, Lord." "Go on a mission trip." "Yes, Lord." "Join a ministry at church." "Yes, Lord." "Clean up your life." "Yes, Lord." The best gifts come from the heart; they're sacrificial...they meant something to you to give 'em. The best gifts are personal. They represent our hearts. God doesn't want a gift card from you this Christmas. He wants you. Be like Mary. Say "Yes" to God even if it means shame or embarrassment from your peers (Mary endured some embarrassment from revealing her pregnancy to Joseph who probably didn't believe her story initially.), even if it means a major change to your lifestyle or circumstances (You better believe that baby Jesus changed Mary's whole life.), or even if it means you have to put your personal plans on hold. Are you ready to give your very life to Jesus?

Jesus' birth brings us near to God for a major life change!

But maybe you think "I'm too old to change." Don't forget that God used Moses starting when he was 80 years old (during his retirement from 40 years working as a shepherd). Moses did his most significant work in his post-retirement. Maybe you say, "I've done too many bad things; why would God want to use me?" Romans 8:37-39 says that despite how far you may feel from God, there is nothing that can separate any of us from his love. When we

approach Jesus and accept his gift of new life, we have victory; we are more than conquerors in Christ. There is nothing that we can do that will change the fact that God loves us. Why is that? It's because He made us. Part of that seeps into us, doesn't it? Have you ever made something for an art class that wasn't very good, but it's so precious to you, you just can't throw it away? That's how much value we have to God, except He made you perfectly instead of "not very good."

We celebrate Christmas because Jesus' birth makes it possible for us to experience a spiritual status change - from death to life; from living for ourselves to living for Christ.

Before we follow Christ, we live as citizens of the world; when we follow Christ, we need to live as citizens of his kingdom. My good friends Tony and Marie Calvert are celebrating in North Carolina. I know Tony from leading youth ministry in Irvine, California. He met Marie while on a missions trip to Japan, and that was it! They knew they were destined to be together. Now they are married and have a son, Trafton. Marie recently completed requirements for U.S. citizenship. She's lived in Japan and the Philippines as well as East and West Coasts of the United States, but now, she has chosen to not just live in the United States; she has chosen to become a citizen of the United States. She's not just a visitor or a resident; she's a citizen. Citizenship is a big deal. It grants a person rights, protections, and promises...freedoms and liberties in this country.

This Christmas, it can be really easy to feel lost, out of touch, and floating like a jellyfish. Maybe you feel totally broken. Jesus' birth opens the door for us to live as citizens of God's kingdom - to live righteously, to extend compassion in Jesus' name, to experience freedom from sin, to be the person God created you to be. Remember, Jesus' birth - the Immanuel - shows us that He wasn't just passing through. He was more than a visitor. He came to the earth to be near us - to be with us - to remind us just how much God loves us - to invite us to live, to act, to speak, and to demonstrate love as citizens of God's Kingdom. Let's pray.