

Where is God? So often, we ask that question in times of trials and difficulties. Hardship comes. We are tight on money. Some painful situation comes along. “Isn’t God supposed to always be with us?” we ask. And yet we wonder...where is God?

For 400 years, Israel had wondered where God was. He was silent. There had been no glory present in the temple. The oppression of Babylon had given way to Persia, then to Rome. Still, where was God?

We can wonder where God is when he is silent. We wonder if he’s forgotten us. And yet, the reality is that God comes near to us, but he calls us to embrace him by faith. What does it mean to embrace God by faith?

Embrace the miraculous message of Christ (v. 18)

Matthew tells us that the birth of Jesus Christ came about in a particular way. But in fact, Matthew doesn’t use the normal word for birth – he uses the word that describes the origins of Jesus Christ – the genesis of Christ. He is telling us about how the new thing that God is doing is miraculous.

What is miraculous is how Christ came into this world. God did not have a human being that already existed and that he adopted by placing his Christ into that person. That is the heresy of adoptionism that the Church has rejected. Christ did not come into the world in the form of a human being but not really being human – that is the heresy of Docetism. No – Matthew tells us that God was born in human form. Jesus was fully God and fully human. He had to be fully God to rescue us from our sins, but only a human could pay for the sins of humanity. So Matthew tells us that Mary conceived a baby not by sexual relations, but by the Holy Spirit.

This is the miraculous message of Christ – he can make something out of nothing. The God who created the world out of nothing – *ex nihilo* – is the God who can condescend and form a baby in a womb without the act of human procreation. The reason that Jesus came by a miraculous birth is that he needed to be born not by the will of human beings, but by the will of God. Had he been born by an act of procreation, he would not be fully God. And as the Church would confess in the 4th century, “That which is not assumed is not healed” – meaning that God had to embrace all of us to heal all of us. He had to take on flesh and blood to heal us from the power of sin and death. But he had to come in the nature of God.

The message of Christ is that he comes from heaven’s throne as fully God and fully human. But the wonder of Christ is that he didn’t come with all of the pomp and ceremony of a royal figure. When Queen Elizabeth II came to the US in the 1990s, she had two outfits for every occasion, including a couple of mourning outfits in case she had to attend a sudden funeral. She had matching hats for every outfit, a hair stylist, a personal attendant, and something in the order

of 30 support staff. She even had special toilet seat covers brought with her! A plane full of clothes, shoes, attendants, and supplies accompanied the Queen for one trip to the US.

Contrast this with the Son of God – he left his Father’s throne above with all of the freedom of heaven and emptied himself of all but love as Charles Wesley says. He came with a royal announcement of an army, and yet he was born to parents who were poor, who didn’t have a place to stay when he was born, and to a working class family.

The miracle of Christ is that God came into this world by a miracle. God with us means that we need to embrace the miracle of Christ.

Embrace the scandal of Christ (vv. 19-21)

When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant with a child, he assumes that she has been unfaithful. Matthew tells us that Joseph was a righteous man – he would not have been unfaithful to Mary. And all of this had happened during a time of betrothal. To be betrothed was stronger than engagement. First, parents would arrange a marriage between a young man and a younger woman. Then, there would be a bridal price paid to the woman’s family. The betrothal time would mean that the couple was committed to one another and could only be broken by divorce. Yet they were not to be together apart from supervised visits.

Yet when Mary returns from her time with her cousin Elizabeth, Luke tells us that Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant. In a day where couples didn’t spend any time together before they were married, this would have been scandalous. How could Joseph, a righteous and upright man, marry a woman who had been promiscuous? If he married her, Joseph would look like he was admitting that he was the father, that he had been promiscuous before marriage.

So Joseph had made plans to divorce her quietly – he wouldn’t submit her to public shame. A public divorce would result in Mary being ineligible for any future marriage.

But at the moment when Joseph was going to divorce her quietly, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and commanded him to take Mary as his wife. And the way that Joseph was told was by a connection to God’s promises: “Joseph, son of David....” The heavenly reminder of God’s promises comes in a shocking way – God will use a poor, lowly family, and he will come in the midst of scandal. He won’t come in pomp and ceremony. He will come with all of the disadvantages of this world.

It could be that the angels words continue on to the end of v. 23 – an explanation in the dream that this is to fulfill the Lord’s promises through Isaiah. But regardless, Joseph is told to take Mary as his wife because God has come to them to do what Ps. 130:8 says: to free Israel from all her sins and sorrows.

Christianity is a religion that comes in scandal. God does not come into this world in the acceptable ways. He comes into this world associating with sinners, with scandal, with the lowest. We try to avoid being associated with people who have been in scandal. God does not. God is not ashamed of scandalous sinners. In fact, he comes in scandal to say, “I came to deliver you from your sins. I came to rescue you from the scandal of sin. I come associated with you so that I can free you.”

And embracing the Christian faith is to embrace the God who embraces scandalous sinners. He welcomes sinners. He loves those who have done wrong. He joins himself with people who have blown it and says, “I will walk with you. I will cleanse you from all of your unrighteousness. I will forgive you and make you new.”

Christianity is scandalous. To embrace Christ is to embrace the God who embraces you in your guilt and shame. It is to admit that we need to be rescued. And it is to admit that we are to come alongside those who are weak, poor, broken, and needy so that they could be lifted up. The scandal of Christ is not to avoid every possible risk, but to embrace it by faith.

Embrace the Obedience of Heaven (vv. 24-25)

What is Joseph’s response? He awakens from his dream and he does exactly what the angel of the Lord told him to do – he takes Mary as his wife. Faith is not simply belief in your head, nor is it a statement we make. It is an act of trust that causes us to act. For this reason, James says that faith demonstrates itself through works. Faith causes action. Faith results in obedience. No faith, no obedience. Know faith, know obedience.

So Joseph embraced the scandal of Christ and the miracle of Christ. He would live his life with the shadow of shame over him. He would live with the whispers in a small town for years and years. His business might have even suffered because people may not have wanted to be associated with that immoral man and his wife. He embraced obedience because he had been commanded by God. This is what it looks like to be a righteous man – to obey God rather than men. To do what God commands, even if it looks bad in the eyes of religious people. He is instructed with the voice of heaven, and he follows that word.

And when we embrace the miraculous, scandalous obedience of heaven, what will happen is that we will...

Worship the Glorious Christ (vv. 22-23)

Matthew tells us that the birth of Jesus took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and you shall call his name Immanuel (which means God with us).” He takes a strange verse from Isaiah 7 where Ahaz is promised that even though Jerusalem is under attack, God would keep his promise to David by having a king on the

throne forever. But this child is a surprise. The people had been looking for a son of David, but not for Immanuel.

Yet this had been the aim of God's plan since the very beginning. From the garden, Adam and Eve had known the sweetness of walking and talking with God. Yet when they took and ate of the forbidden fruit, they were removed from the presence of the Lord, cast out of the Garden and sent into exile. It looked like everything was hopeless for humanity.

God, however, had a different plan. All was not hopeless. God would come and dwell with his people. He would come and dwell among them. He would come first in the fire and thunder of Sinai, in unapproachable glory. He would come and be among them by a pillar of fire by night and a cloud during the day. He would come and dwell among them in the tabernacle as they wandered through the wilderness and then in the temple when they settled in the land. But now, God would come among them in flesh and blood, walking and talking with them. His glory would sound like a baby's cry. God would come near. But how would he come near? In what would look like weakness and vulnerability.

God with us. This is the theme of the Bible. And for Matthew, it is the theme of his book. The presence of God is with us. God has come near. Matthew begins and ends his gospel with this good news: that the Christ who has come near to us in a baby now goes with us as we go on mission into the world. For the Christ who came as a baby now goes with us: "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (28:20).

So we can go and worship Christ in the world because Christ has come before us, he goes with us, and he is behind us. He will never leave us nor abandon us.

Do you want to know where God is? Embrace the mystery of God with us – in the miraculous, scandalous birth of his Son. Embrace him by faith by walking in obedience. And embrace him in worship...and you just might find that he is closer than your very breath.