

“Christmas Part 2: God in Solidarity with Us” based on Matthew 1:18-25
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione, Christmas Eve, 2022, Shelby Presbyterian Church

Seven years ago, my wife Claire and I spent Christmas in our seminary apartment in Princeton and for the first time, we didn't have to travel. Her parents had come to town, and although Christmas had come, we were waiting. You see, this was our own Advent, our own season of waiting, for our first child. Claire's due date had already passed, and we thought – Any minute now we would be running to the hospital.

We had only one day we really didn't want to go to the hospital, and that was Christmas, because, now let's be honest, I feel sorry for anyone sharing a birthday with Jesus. Within a few days is already hard enough but born on Christmas day is a lot to bear.

Still, selfishly, I think we would have been relieved to have a routine childbirth on Christmas. Instead, it was on January 3rd, when at a checkup, they noticed Claire had high blood pressure. So our midwives said, “hey, we need to act,” and we gave our firstborn an eviction notice.

So, as I read today's gospel, I was struck by Matthew's non anxious portrayal. We were anxious, and it was likely a very anxious time for Mary and Joseph. But Matthew doesn't get into the nitty gritty of the situation. It's all very basic language – “she brought forth a son” – as though it's that simple. Childbirth was not a private affair in a hospital back then, but a very public – in home occurrence – in a culture where, and time when privacy didn't really exist.

Now, at least one ancient text tried to expand this scene a century after Matthew first wrote it. In this account, it was the easiest of childbirths, with no struggle for mother or child. What's more, where Luke puts the birth in a common room, one with animals, this account puts the birth in a cave, removed from the witness of others. That is, except for a midwife who saw a great light, that gradually dimmed, until there was Jesus, nursing at the breast of his mother. It's all so sweet, so simple, and so easy.

If Matthew had knew about this, and certainly if it were true, he could easily have added it. But I think Matthew's slim choice of words here actually speak volumes. You see, childbirth was not a private affair – his readers knew its challenges. They knew the risks for mothers and babies, and the joy of a successful, albeit far from guaranteed to be safe, delivery.

Matthew did not include details, because every home's common room was a delivery room. The truth is that the medicalization of childbirth has been wonderful in lowering the risk to mom and child, but it has also made this moment foreign to the experience of most people. The writer of that alternative story probably rewrote Matthew's account because they felt reality would have been undignified for Jesus. If this child is divine, surely what everyone knew of childbirth, with the blood and feces, the sweat and intense pain, had to be written out of Jesus's birth plan. So, made it about a light, and then a baby and nothing remotely messy.

I am grateful that I had the opportunity to be in the delivery room for both of our children. My experience affords me a glimpse into what ancient readers might have assumed when reading Matthew. You see, there is a reason that Matthew and Luke have a birth narrative, and why the gospels of Mark and John are wonderful, even without one. Jesus could have been God, come in

the form of a human being, without ever having to have been born of a woman. He could have just shown up.

So, Mark, likely to be the earliest gospel written, just starts with Jesus's ministry. But Luke and Matthew refuse to skip over the beginning, because it is in Jesus's birth, that we see what it truly means for us, and what we believe the gospel to be. The good news is the Kingdom of God, and the reign of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed King, who is Emmanuel, or "God with us." But what's more is that this is not merely God being seen with us, but the birth of Jesus is God with us in our humanity, in our limits, and in the messiness that is human life.

John skipped the birth narrative, defining it though in theology terms, "The Word became flesh, and dwelled among us." This is beautiful and the foundation of our historic faith, from the Apostles to today. It means that what we celebrate today is a God who loves us so deeply, that to show that love, our God shared our life – in complete solidarity with us. This is the gospel's foundation: In Jesus, the God of Israel came down to be one of us. He is the embodiment of Israel in his humanity, to fulfill the story of God's people.

What's more, through Jesus, we see revealed the fullness of who God is – a Trinity – with an eternal Parent, who is eternally a parent only if there is an eternal Child, and these two eternally love each other, in and through the Holy Spirit. In eternity, there is no moment when the Son is born or made, so, there is never a moment when the Son was not there. This is how the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and the Spirit is there proceeding from both the Father and Son. There is one God, but in this one God, there is a community of love.

If you tuned out with all that theological talk, come back to me now, please, because I know this is a mystery that cannot be fully understood by any of us. You see, I can't imagine explaining this perfectly, but it is important, because of what this means about us, who we are, and how we live. We are here today, not because any of us, even me, have complete knowledge, and it's not because we don't have any confusion or doubt.

But whether we believe this doctrine perfectly or not, it doesn't change the fact that the belief of the church which we have received is that this eternal Son became a person like you and me. He was born of a woman, just like us. He lived a life with limits, just like us. He died, just as we will. And he rose again, promising then that we will too.

On this Christmas Eve, we celebrate the birth of our King and that we are his subjects. But his reign is not one that needs to be enforced, but which comes to us through love. The power of the incarnation is not simply that our God took human form, but that our God did so to be in solidarity with us, in the mess of our lives from the start with a messy birth in a public room, laid in a manger to a shameful death, hanged on a cross by earthly powers. But only to defeat those powers by rising to new life.

On this Christmas, if your life feels messy, or difficult, or if you have doubt or even despair, I want you to remember that God is with you – that is the point of this season. Whether you sense it or not, and whether you seek him or not, the Triune God is pursuing you with love, crying out by your side for you. The promise made to us by this triune God is not that a life of faith leads

to sunshine and roses, having all of our wishes come true and never suffering. No, the promise faithfulness to our King Jesus, is that he will always be with us, even to the end of the age.

Claire's induction lasted more than 36 hours and she showed tremendous endurance through it all, and as she strained near the end, teams of doctors were lining up behind me, prepared to do a C-section if need be, and to be there to care for our newborn child. At 4:26 p.m., our son was born, but he was worn out and unresponsive.

As I tried to congratulate Claire, I was looking back and watching the doctors behind me, with my son on a tray, and them lifting his limbs. One by one, each one fell, with no resistance at all. They intubated him to get him breathing and they swept him away before we could embrace him and love him to the NICU where they did that for us.

I am so thankful he recovered quickly – just a few hours later, he was breathing on his own. But in that moment, and certainly, if things had gone worse, I was and still am consoled by the fact that the God revealed in Jesus is not distant, but humble and near. Our God is willing to endure the worst of our life and promising to always be with us. I think I'd have a hard time believing in this gospel, if Jesus's birth was just a flash of light and the appearance at his mother's breath. That sounds like a made-up story worthy of a pagan god. I like the real story better.

So, this Christmas, let's resist the urge to clean up God's story. Let's resist the urge to clean up our own stories even. We don't have to make them measure up to worldly standards or expectations. Instead hold on to our hope – the hope that comes with our God who chose to come to us descending from messed up family in our messy lives, and was born in the same way we are, with all of its mess too.

Our God is our King, come to be our human brother, faithful to us, not for the sake of God's self, but for our sake, to redeem us, so that all of humanity, might come together in faithfulness to our newborn King. Amen.

“Christmas Part 3: Unity Challenges Authority” based on Matthew 2:1-12
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione, Christmas, 2022, Shelby Presbyterian Church

On this Christmas morning, we have come here to this place to be with each other. We come from different families, and different ethnic backgrounds. We have different traditions and have different experiences in our lives. We come from different social groups, even different political parties, and we have different incomes and different levels of education.

We are at different places in our faith, in our doubt, in the health of our bodies, and in our state of mind. Yet, here we are, here we were last night too, and here in this place, this building, in this community online and at home, we come to be with one another.

Despite all of our differences in this body alone, we are also joined with other churches, communities across our city, our county, our state, our country, and our world. All of us celebrate today in different, unique ways, and yet, we are still one. We celebrate communion this morning, the same sacred meal that Jesus began on the night he was betrayed and before he died, and the same kind of meal in which he revealed himself after his resurrection. We share in a meal named for our unity, for it is communion, both with our God, and with each other in God’s presence.

This is what we celebrate today, and we do so because even though we miss the mark. We celebrate despite our mistakes, our failures, our bad choices. We do so, even though we cross the line sometimes, trespassing against God and neighbor. We gather despite our great debts, and our failure to forgive debts. We celebrate despite the systemic ills that still plague our world, and the individual failures we each endure in our lives and relationships.

Whatever we call sin, what it is deep down is the reality that we know we can do better. Yet, despite all of this, we gather together because from out of love for us, while we were still sinners, our God came down to us, to be one of us.

This is the unity of the church in Christ. It is the vision of what God desires from this Christmas story: The unity of people across all of culture’s barriers, reflecting the image of our God. We are sharing in the inheritance that only rightly belongs to the eternal Son of God, who was born a baby on that first Christmas morning, to live as we live enduring all the messes, and die for us, and rose for us, to give us new life, or as the hymn says second birth.

This is a gift that empowers us by his Spirit to share in his work, reconciling all things in this world to him, and that begins with loving one another. It means laying down our boundaries and power, to be loved by God and love God, and love one another and be loved by one another.

This kind of unity is a threat to power. Power likes to grow by dividing us. This threat is what Matthew shows us in today’s reading. You see, this narrative is meant to show Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, the anointed King of not only Israel, but who will rule over all the nations. And so, he presents Jesus as the fulfilment of all the Hebrew scriptures. He is at once the new Abraham and David, the new Moses. He is the embodiment of the people of Israel before God, and the embodiment of Israel’s God before all the world.

But as Matthew debuts Jesus as this King, he presents for his readers three kings to consider. No, I am not talking about the Magi. They weren't kings. I don't know where that came from, though we will sing that hymn next. They were astrologers or scholars. The word Magi means a sacred or priestly class astrologer in a Persian religion. They were part of a royal court, but they are not kings.

So, there are three kings and those are Herod, Caesar, and the King who sent the Magi to Jesus. The Kingship of Jesus is a threat to all three, yet he is also a sign of hope, the hope that all of humanity might come together in peace.

The first King, Herod the Great, was king of Judea and he already claimed the title of "King of the Jews." His power was of a dubious authority, as he was installed by Rome, because his dad had money, and they both had made the right connections. He got rid of any rightful claims that anyone else might have had. He was so ruthless that at the end of his life, he feared no one would mourn at his funeral. So, he hatched this plan to have 20 people executed at his funeral so that people would at least be crying, if not for him. Thankfully, a family member put the kibosh on that, but that is how ruthless this person was in pursuit of his power. This is the King that claims Jesus's title.

But of course, Herod gets his power from Caesar Augustus, the self-proclaimed savior and Lord of the world. He claimed to have brought peace and security through his military might occupying his empire with Legions of soldiers to preserve peace, making use of their cruel and unusual punishment – crucifixion. You see, if you go into a town and string a whole bunch of people on crosses, everyone else kind of falls in line. This Caesar and his successors are always there in the background, not just in Matthew's gospel, but in all of the new testament, when gentile readers see Jesus called Lord and savior.

The final King to consider is the unnamed King who allowed his Magi to go to Judea. You see, the word Magi leads us to think of Persia and Herod got his power after Persia had taken control of Jerusalem for three years. Rome came in and kicked them out, and put Herod in. So, these guys were taking a chance, going into this territory. Yet, their king sent them, possibly because he felt something great happened, something worth going to, that didn't improve his power, but was good for the whole world.

The majority of examples of a king in this story would tell us get rid of this savior stuff. I'm more powerful when I don't have to submit to a new king. How often do we see people in our world doing that? But the beauty of this gospel story is that we are here not as an identical or homogenous crowd, but as people dressed in pajamas and people dressed in suits. We come together because all of the differences this world puts on us don't matter, because our God shared in our humanity, to live as we live, and to die for us, and rise for us.

So, on this Christmas morning, remember that the gift we have in Christ is a gift that brings us together to set aside our differences and rejoice in the kingship of one God, one King, one church (despite our differences in denominations) because there is one love that unites us all in the Holy Spirit. Amen.