

WORSE THAN RABIES
Matthew 1:18-25

I recently read an amazing but true story that actually took place back in 2005. It made the news on CNN, which these days may mean it was fake news, but it was also on Yahoo news, so it had a chance of being true. In Ethiopia amid considerable upheaval there was a rash of kidnapping of young girls. Groups of men would take the girls, then having forced them into submission would give them to a man as a wife. One particular 12 year old girl suffered that terrible fate when a group of 7 men kidnapped her. They held her captive for a week, beating her repeatedly. This is where the story turns bizarre. After a week 3 large Ethiopian lions suddenly burst out of the brush into the camp where the men were keeping her and pursued the men who had taken the girl. It was assumed that the lions apparently heard the girl's whimpering. It is presumed it must have sounded like a lion cub to them. Of course, the girl figured she may have escaped from those terrible men only to become prey for the lions. But that's not what happened. Instead, after chasing the captors away, the lions formed a protective perimeter around the girl and stood guard, keeping her safe. Later the police finally found her location. Police sergeant Wondimu Wedajo said, "They stood guard until we found her, and then they just left her... and went back into the forest." When the police arrived and rescued her, the lions just walked away! The police sergeant said, "Everyone thinks this is some kind of miracle."

Yeah, no kidding. It's like something out of a Disney animated movie for kids, except it actually happened. It was a miraculous rescue, by a group of lions, of all things! Today we are going to hear about an even more miraculous rescue. It is a rescue that every human being, including all of us, needs more than anything else. We will get a glimpse of this rescue in Matthew 1:18-25. Let's look at that passage together.

GOD WAS DOING THE IMPOSSIBLE

These verses begin with the familiar story of Joseph and Mary. These two first century Israeli teenagers from anonymous blue collar families were engaged to be married. Today engagements get broken all the time. In ancient Israel that was not the case. Engagement was a more binding arrangement even than it is today. If you break an engagement today it means you might have to take a ring back, you might lose some money you put on deposit for a wedding venue, there will be some

embarrassment and almost certainly some broken hearts. But in that day to break an engagement required a divorce. The engagement was considered as binding as a marriage. Engaged couples were even referred to as a husband and wife. They just didn't live together until the wedding.

Joseph was shocked and devastated to learn that his fiancée was pregnant. She might have been 4 months along when he learned of this upsetting situation. He had no trouble doing the math on that deal. He knew that he hadn't been sleeping with her, so if she was pregnant it was because she had slept with someone else. He surely felt betrayed in possibly the worst way one can experience.

The natural response to being hurt like that is to be angry and to lash out, to make the other person feel the pain of their apparent betrayal. No doubt he felt the temptation to publicly divorce Mary so everyone would know what she had done to him. But to his great credit Joseph did not give in to that temptation. Being faithful to the law in that day as it was interpreted by the rabbis meant he had to divorce Mary. They said it commanded divorce in such a situation, which was not accurate, but it was the teaching of that day. Evidently Joseph really cared about Mary, so instead of shaming her he proposed to end their relationship as quietly as he could manage.

Before he could act an angel appeared to Joseph and told him that Mary had not betrayed him. The child she was carrying was not the product of an illicit affair, but of the work of God. Matthew said this was all prophesied by Isaiah. Verse 23 alludes to Isaiah 7:14, "the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel." Those statements raise a couple of large questions. First, is that an accurate understanding of Isaiah 7:14, and second, how is such a thing possible?

There are people who claim that Isaiah's prophecy was not about a virgin giving birth at all, but simply about a young woman giving birth to a son. The Hebrew word translated "virgin" in the original text could mean merely young woman. It could mean either "virgin" or just young women. Many claim that there never was a prophecy of a virgin birth.

The historical context of the prophecy was that the nation of Judah was being attacked by a coalition of two nations, Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel. Their goal was to remove Ahaz, the king of Judah, from the throne and put a puppet king under their control on the throne of Judah.

Ahaz was badly shaken because he knew that he had as much chance against the coalition as the Cleveland Browns would have against the defending Super Bowl champion Patriots should they play each other. Which is to say zero chance. Isaiah, the prophet, came to Ahaz with a reassuring message. God wanted the line of David to stay on the throne of Judah, so he would not be removed. God told Ahaz through the prophet to stay calm. Of the impending invasion God said in verse 7, "It will not take place. It will not happen." Then the Lord did an unusual thing. He told Ahaz to ask for a sign to confirm this. Ahaz was not a great or godly king. But he wanted to look like he was. So he said he wouldn't ask for a sign because that would demonstrate a lack of faith in God's promise. This was nothing but religious pretense and presumption. He was refusing to do what God told him under the guise of being so holy that he would never question God's promise by asking for a sign. In case you didn't know, God really despises hypocrisy and religious pretense.

Ahaz was disobeying God again. God *commanded* him to ask for a confirming sign, but Ahaz refused to do it. So here's the response in verses 13-14, "Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

So is this a prophecy of a virgin birth or not? First, remember that the Greek word Matthew used in referring to this verse was unambiguous. It means a virgin, not merely a young woman. You could say that was just Matthew spinning this to make it say what he wanted, except that the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament which was done more than a century before Matthew, used that same word. The ancient Jewish rabbis understood Isaiah's prophecy to be of a virgin birth, not merely a young woman giving birth.

A second important factor is to ask how a young woman giving birth to a son and naming him Immanuel could be a sign. Young women all over Judah were giving birth to sons every day. How is that a sign? That would be like God was saying, "I will give you a sign, and the sign is tomorrow the sun will rise in the east." That's not much of a sign since the sun rises in the east every day. It is the normal course of events. And some young woman having a baby boy also happens every day in the normal course of events. There is an unfortunate omission in the NIV translation. The original text of verse 14 actually read, "The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son." The word "behold" indicated something dramatic, even miraculous. A young woman giving birth to a son is not a dramatic, miraculous sign.

Yes, but how could something that is going to happen hundreds of years later be a sign for Ahaz? At that point I think the Lord was saying because you refused to do what I commanded and ask for a sign, I will give a sign, but it's not one that will help you. You won't do as I commanded and ask for a sign, so you won't get one you can see. There will be one that will guarantee a descendant of David will be on the throne of Israel, but you're not going to see it. You are going to have to take it on faith that I will keep my promise about the impending invasion and know that the invasion will fall apart. It will happen in the space of time it would take the prophesied boy grow to an age where he knows right from wrong.

All right, suppose Isaiah did prophesy that a virgin would give birth to a son and call him Immanuel. How is that possible? And how could God do something like that to an innocent young woman? Consider Genesis 1:24. "And God said, Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds; the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind. And it was so." God said, "let's have some cows, sheep, goats, chickens, and also some lions, cougars, buffalo, antelope and others." And it happened. It was so. Verse 27 says the Lord created human beings in his image.

If God could say, "Let's have a bunch of animals" and it happened, is it too much to believe that God could say, "Let's have an embryonic human being show up in this woman's uterus," and have it happen?

I think it's ironic that some people scoff at the idea of Jesus' virgin birth because it's impossible. Those same people believe with all their hearts in the Big Bang. Let's review. At some point in the far distant past, billions of years ago, the story goes, nothing existed. But then nothing blew up in an inconceivably massive explosion that resulted in the creation of everything. Could I just point out that if "nothing blew up" then there was no explosion? That's what "nothing blew up" means!

It takes a universe of more faith to believe in the Big Bang than it does to believe that an Almighty God could create life in a woman's uterus in a miraculous action. They are straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel. And it turns out that the majority of people get that. Pew Research has discovered that 73% of Americans believe in the virgin birth of Jesus.

But how was that fair to Mary? It put her in a terrible situation. Who was going to believe that wild story? Right, you're pregnant but God did it? Not only is that

unbelievable, but it is a form of blasphemy, a huge sin in ancient Israel. Let's remember Mary's response when the angel appeared to her and told her what was about to happen. Luke 1:38 says, "I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled." Mary said, "Okay, let's do this." I think we can be confident if she had said, "Are you kidding me? No way, Jose. I'm not doing that. Do you have any idea what's going to happen to me? No sir. Not me. Find somebody else" that God would have found a woman we'll call Plan B, or plan beta. Fortunately God is omniscient, so he knew how Mary would respond.

But why did this happen? There are a couple of reasons. One is it was intended as a sign, a miraculous sign. This was part of Jesus fulfilling prophecy. This unique, miraculous event fulfilled a highly unlikely prophecy from hundreds of years before the birth occurred. Second, it was a way that Jesus could be both fully human, given life by a human woman, and fully divine, his life initiated by the Spirit of God himself. It was a way of him being fully human, but without a fallen human nature.

Surely you can't really believe this, can you, Rick? Angels appearing to people and a virgin miraculously having a baby? This is like a fairy tale. You'd have to be uber gullible to believe such a thing. Perhaps. If so, call me uber gullible. The whole life of Christ was a miracle. It is not difficult to believe that an Almighty God who created all that exists, including a universe so vast it is beyond our comprehension, could accomplish the events described in this passage.

GOD WAS SAVING PEOPLE

The point of this miraculous event is revealed in verse 21. "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." The name "Jesus" is the Greek form of the name Jehoshua, or Joshua. It means "Yahweh saves." Jesus came to save us from our sins.

It's great that God was acting to save us. We have a sense that we need to be saved. The problem is we usually don't think we need to be saved from our sins. Think of the people of Israel in the first century. Life was pretty harsh. People mostly worked the land using hand tools and lived in small houses made of stone and mud. Life was a constant struggle to have enough to eat and to survive, living conditions were mostly rather grinding and harsh. Beyond that the people of Israel were ruled by Roman conquerors. It galled them that they were God's chosen people, but they didn't look like it or live like it. They looked and lived like any other third rate country that Rome conquered.

The people of Israel longed to be saved, but they wanted to be saved from the Romans, from oppression by a foreign pagan power. They wanted to be saved from powerlessness and restricted freedom. They wanted to be saved from the constant struggle just to survive. They wanted to have abundance and ease and never have to concern themselves with how they were going to get by.

They weren't all that much interested in being saved from their sins. They were like us. We want to be saved from the threat of not having enough money, of being alone and lonely, of having a life that is completely empty, from the fear of being rejected. We want to be saved from pain and the threat of some terrible illness. We want to be saved from death. We don't think much about being saved from our sins.

How many times has God entered history via a virgin birth? That has only happened once, and no matter how long humans live on this planet, that one time will be the only occurrence of that particular event. It is unique in the absolute sense of that word. What does it suggest to you when you read that only once in all of time God came by means of a virgin birth with the purpose of saving us from our sins? That says to me that this is the most important thing he could do. If he's going to go to that length, clearly saving us from our sins is the biggest issue God had to deal with.

Laurie has 2 dresses that she has kept for 38 years. This is highly unusual for her. She is loath to wear something that is even 5 years old because it will be obviously out of date. But 38 years! That's crazy. She gets on me because I occasionally wear the first aloha shirt I ever bought and it's only 21 years old. She wishes I wouldn't. But she has these 2 dresses that are 38 years old! And she will never wear either one of them ever again. If she did you'd laugh at her because they are so out of style. They're so out of style they can't even be retro chic anymore. One of them is the dress she wore when we left the church after our wedding, and the other is her wedding dress. No one will ever wear those dresses again. Why would she keep those ancient relics? Because they are reminders of a once in a lifetime event. They speak of the day we got married. What a big deal weddings are! That wedding dress is the most expensive dress she has ever owned, and she only wore it once. We got married in August in Fullerton. It was hot. And I wore a velvet tuxedo. I even made my brother and several good friends wear tuxedos. That was the only time in my life I have asked friends or family to wear a tuxedo. So much effort goes into a wedding, and money as well. We make a huge deal about a wedding because it is perhaps the most important thing we ever do. Marriage is ideally a once in a lifetime event. Who we marry will have more impact on our lives than

almost anything else. That's why a wedding is such a big deal. The uniqueness and the effort that goes into it speaks of how important it is. The uniqueness and effort that went into Jesus coming into this world speaks to how crucially important it is. It says saving us from our sins is the most important thing in history!

The fact that saving us from our sins was uniquely crucial tells us that our sins are actually the greatest threat to our being in all that exists. This is not intrinsically obvious to most of us. It doesn't feel like that's true. If I asked you to write out a list of things that cause you concern, things that you might worry about, I'm going to guess that your sins will not be at the top of the list. In fact, they probably won't even make the list. And yet this passage suggests our own sins are threat number one. It's not nuclear war, it's not some deadly mutated virus that might kill us all, it's not terrorism, it's not the Big Earthquake. It's our own sin!

Romans 6:23 says "the wages of sin is death." We know how wages operate. You work for someone, and you receive pay from them. When we sin we receive death. Last summer when Laurie and I had a close encounter with a bat our son, Toby, the medical student, told us we had to get rabies shots. He said we could be infected by the bat and not even know it. Then he said something that got our attention. "You can't wait. You must start getting the shots within 72 hours. And you need to know that if you don't get the shots, but then you later start experiencing symptoms, you are going to die. There is no treatment at that point, and the disease is 100% fatal. You will die."

Romans 6:23 says when you sin, not if, but when, because as Romans 3:23 says, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," the result is death. It is unavoidable. It is more certain than the effect of rabies. There is no escape. Death is the inevitable and inescapable result of sin. And we've all been infected.

You might object, "Hey wait a minute. I know I've sinned. I'm not kidding myself about that. But I'm not dead. In fact, I'm doing just fine. So how is the wage of sin, death? What we need to understand is that physical death is actually an illustration. It is a tangible and scary picture of the death that Paul referred to. But it is a very instructive picture. How terrible is death? There is no way to adequately describe how awful it is. The specter of it looms over all of us, and its presence is horrible. I recently had a doctor's appointment in which there was the possibility I had a

The absolute pervasiveness and terror of death says to us that there is another death that is just as widespread as physical death and even more awful. Our sin disconnects us from God. That alone is the worst thing that could happen to us. We

hear about hell and how terrible it is. The heart of hell's horror is being separated from God. He is the source of life, the source of all that is good. The thing we don't often focus on is we need God. We need his good and his presence and his love. We need that as much as our bodies need air. Without them we die. Without air our bodies quickly suffocate and expire. Without God's presence and his love our souls begin to suffocate and wither.

The Bible tells us life, real life, means more than existence. It is existing with peace, joy, love and hope in such abundance at all times that it cannot be contained. Death is the absence of life, or the absence of those things. It is fear, discontentment, anger, bitterness, being unloved and unable to love, it is hopelessness and restlessness and continual frustration. It spills over onto other people and destroys our ability to truly love them and be at peace, be unified with them.

As we look around in the world and see all the hurt, the pain, the fear, the discord, the racism, the anger in the world, we need to understand it all comes from one source. It is all death. It is the wages of sin. This is what sin does to us all.

The worst part of this is that at some point after we die the wages of sin becomes both magnified to the extreme and permanent. We will exist in permanent death, cut off from all that is good. The fundamental truth that we all need to grasp is that the worst thing that could ever happen to us is to be left in our sin and its result. It is literally a fate worse than physical death.

Jesus came to save us from all of that. He came to give us life. He came to connect us with the Father, the Creator of life and the source of all that is good and joyful. He came to fill us with hope.

Jesus first saves us from the penalty of sin. Remember that the ultimate death is that permanent separation from God. That is the wage of the sin in us. But Jesus came to receive that wage from God in our place. He experienced that death when he died on the cross with all of our guilt piled on him. You and I are left with a choice. We can refuse to accept what Jesus offers in his grace and take the wages of our sin, meaning our own permanent separation from God. Or we can accept what Jesus offered and never fear that fate again. The penalty has been paid. There is nothing left for us to pay.

I'm going to sound like one of those cheesy infomercials on television now. That's incredibly good news, but wait! There's more! Jesus also saves us from the power

of sin. Unfortunately sin is way deeper than just doing a few things wrong. Paul talks in Romans 7 about wanting to do right things, but somehow ending up doing wrong things he doesn't even want. He says it is sin doing it in him. Something has infected us and has twisted us inside, turning us inward so everything is about self. That something is sin, and it is something we are born with. It is as much a part of us as our own beating heart. We can't fix it. We can't will it away. Remember it is an infection. Like any infection it harms us, it makes us sick. But Jesus promises he will come into our lives even now and begin healing that. He will change us so we are not always controlled by it, thus not always being sick because of it.

Eventually Jesus will completely heal us and save us from even the presence of sin. Because we've lived our whole lives with it we have a hard time even imagining how amazing that would be. Take away the infection completely and all the illness and the symptoms disappear. That means removing all fear, anger, self-obsession, discouragement, hopelessness, frustration and all the rest. It means we will know unlimited joy and peace like we have never known before. We will be truly healthy for the first time.

Years ago I had a virus that affected my inner ear in my right ear, causing vertigo. The initial week or so was terrible, but then my immune system defeated the virus I began to feel some better. But I still had the damage to my ear, and they told me it would probably take 10-12 weeks for that to heal completely. After a couple of months I got to the place where I couldn't remember what it felt like to feel healthy. I thought maybe this was just as good as it gets. What a joy it was when I finally got completely well. Right now we have the infection of sin still in us, and we experience its effects. We don't know what it is like to be fully well and whole. But because Jesus came to save us some day we will be completely healthy. That is something we can't imagine, but we can surely look forward to it.

GOD WAS COMING TO BE WITH US

When I was young verse 23 used to confuse me. At the end of the verse it says, "they will call him Immanuel, which means God with us." My problems were 2. First, do you spell that name with an E or an I? I've seen both, so which is it? Obviously that one doesn't matter much. The one that really bothered me was, what's with this name? Isn't his name Jesus Christ? People called him Jesus and Christ, but no one ever called him Immanuel as far as I can see. Was his middle name Immanuel, so the full name was Jesus Immanuel Christ? When he was a little boy and he got in trouble did Mary say, "Jesus Immanuel Christ you get in this house this instant?" What does this mean?

This is not a name. It was intended as a description of who he actually was and what he came to do. I don't know if you're aware of this, but these days Tom Brady, the quarterback of the New England Patriots, has a new nickname. People have begun calling him "the GOAT." That might sound bad, but it is the opposite of bad. GOAT is an acronym that stands for "Greatest of all time." They are saying he is the greatest quarterback in the history of football. Some even say he's the greatest football player in history. The point is "GOAT" is not his name. It is a description of him. That's what Immanuel is. Oh, well then what do all those letters mean? I is for immutable, m is for might, m is for majestic...No, it's not an acronym like GOAT, it's just a description. Maybe it's like saying he's the franchise, meaning a player that is the heart of the franchise.

Jesus is literally God coming to be with us. God coming to live among us as one of us. This is an astounding thing. God didn't just see that we had a problem and assigned someone to try to fix it. He came to enter into it with us to rescue us. Have you seen the movie *The Princess Bride*? I can't believe it's 30 years old, but it is timeless. In one scene the hero, Wesley, and Princess Buttercup are in the fire swamp, when suddenly Buttercup gets completely swallowed up by quicksand. Wesley is faced with a terrible dilemma. The only way for him to save her is to experience her fate, and to jump into the quicksand and be swallowed himself. If he does nothing Buttercup dies. But if he jumps in after her they will both likely die. He will share her fate. He doesn't hesitate. He grabs a branch and dives in, emerging a minute later hauling himself and Buttercup out by pulling on the branch. That is what God has done. We were swallowed up in a sin and death infested world, dying and hopeless, and God dove in to be with us in order to rescue us. We will never experience anything that Jesus does not know and understand by experience. Writer Madeline L'Engle said, "The virgin birth is far less mind boggling than the power of all Creation stooping so low as to become one of us."

What an astounding thing. God with us. The best thing a parent can ever do for a child is be with them. I remember when our kids were young and they were sick and couldn't sleep at night, or they had a bad dream. I could not make them well. If I could have I would have. But I could stay with them during those night hours. I remember nights when I was exhausted, but I stayed in their room with them. Just my presence comforted them. I would stay with them until they were able to go sound asleep. More than once I thought they were asleep and I would begin to get up to go back to my bed, and they were reach for me to stop me. They needed me there to feel safe.

There was another occasion when I needed to be with my kids. I especially remember Toby's sophomore year in high school. He played JV football that year, but the coaches would also have him suit up for varsity games. They almost never put him in the game, but they wanted him there. That year for their second round CIF playoff game they had to travel to Calexico to play Vincent Memorial High School. I rode a bus for the 2 hour trip out to Calexico to watch Toby mostly stand on the sidelines. I believe he got in for a couple of special teams plays, but mostly he was as much a spectator as I was. But it meant something to him that I was there with him. It said to him that he mattered and his dad loved him.

When we are not doing well, when we are afraid, lacking peace, our God is with us. He entered this world so that we could know that we are never alone. His being with us reminds us that we matter, that our Father in heaven loves us, and that we are never alone.

In Exodus 33:15 after Israel had really messed up by worshiping an idol while out in the Sinai wilderness Moses said to the Lord, "If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here." He knew the thing they most needed was to have the Lord go with them. A. W. Tozer, the writer, once said of most Christians, "they're trying to be happy without a sense of presence." His point was there is no way for any human ever to be happy, to be truly strong without a sense that God is with him or her. And God gives us that Presence now in Immanuel, Jesus Christ. Because of what he is done God goes with us always.

In Exodus 33:16 as Moses stressed the need to have God go with him and the people of Israel he said, "What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" The answer was nothing would. They would have been just another nomadic tribe that wasn't particularly impressive and they would have faded out of history. The same is true of us. We are not impressive. We are not bigger, stronger, smarter, better, more holy or more clever than other people. We have only one thing that distinguishes us. It is that God is with us. But that one thing is the most important thing.

Whenever life gets confusing, hard, painful, frustrating or fearful, remember that God is with you. When you feel like you don't matter even in the least, remember that God is with you, and that distinguishes you from all other people on the earth. And the most comforting news of all is that in the darkest moments that life will have for all of us, those moments when life is coming to an end, we will not be alone. In those scary moments, God will be with us.

APPLICATION

REMEMBER THE TRUTH ABOUT SIN

Sin, doing things our way rather than God's way, living without regard for him and without awe of him, always is disguised as the way to fun and good in life. But the truth is it is way worse than rabies. It is 100% fatal, always. Never forget the worst thing that could happen to you is to live in your sin.

REST IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Jesus didn't send someone to help us. He came to save us himself. The fact that he came to this world himself means that he knows by experience all that we experience. He has compassion for us, he loves us and he has promised that he will never leave us. In the hardest, darkest of times, rest in this comforting truth: God is with you.

REJOICE AND GIVE THANKS

The best response is to continually remind ourselves that God has saved us, that he is with us and will never abandon us. No matter what happens, be it good or bad we should rejoice that he is with us, and we should thank him for saving us from a fate worse than death.