Sermon: The Christmas story, Destiny or Freewill

Scripture: Matt 1:18-25 Sunday, December 17, 2017

Last Sunday we looked at 4 of the Christmas stories together. We we focused on how God customized the news of Christ’s birth to each of the important people involved from Mary the mother of Jesus to the shepherds, to the wise men from the East and even to King Herod. To each of these individuals, God changes the amount of information, the medium and even the extent of participation he expects from his listeners. But no matter who hears the birth announcement, they get that this is a very big event that is going to turn their world upside down, because their salvation is at hand.

Today I want to look at the Christmas story in a different way. I want to look at it from a human perspective. You see, Christmas represents God coming into our world. This raises some special dilemmas from a human perspective. And the dilemma is this. How much of our life and history is really in our hands and how much is in God’s hands? Let me elaborate. You see the thing about the first Christmas was that it was the culmination of so many prophesies. Everything followed a pre-ordained plan. Our passage today from the Gospel of Matt could not be more clear about that. He quotes prophet Isaiah’s words found in the book of IS 7 and 8 Look! The virgin will conceive a child!  
    She will give birth to a son,  
and they will call him Immanuel,[[j](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matt+1&version=NLT#fen-NLT-23144j)]  
    which means ‘God is with us.’”

Matthews Gospel is deliberately using the Isaiah quote to communicate that Jesus’ birth is an event that has predicted hundreds of years ago and if following a predestined path. Now the big question this has raised is this, when you look at the role of human beings in the big story of God, does the way we response have a meaningful impact on history or if history so tightly controlled by God that everything goes according to God’s plan no matter what we do?

On the face of it, it looks like the Bible is saying quite clearly that all life is following a predestined plan. Consider Mary’s life. It certainly looks like she was really destined to be the mother of Jesus. After all, there were many things about the birth of Jesus that had to meet certain conditions according to prophesy. In terms of lineage he had to be a descendent of Abraham according to Genesis 22:18, “and through you all nations on earth shall be blessed”. He also had to be a descendent of Jacob, numbers 24:17 says, “A star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel”. Not just Abraham and Jacob, he also had to be a descendent of David. The famous Is 9 prophecy says this. **6** **For a child is born to us, a son is given to us.** And **the government will rest on his shoulders. These will be the royal titles; Wonderful Councilor, Prince of Peace.** **7** His ever expanding, peaceful government will never end. **He will rule forever with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David.** The passionate commitment of the Lord almighty will guarantee this!

So he genetically he had to be a descendent of Abraham, and Jacob and King David. The last person on that list Kind David lived 1000 years before Jesus, so this was not a simple requirement. Besides that geographically He had to be someone born in Bethlehem as per Micah 5:2, “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
    are only a small village among all the people of Judah.  
Yet a ruler of Israel,  
    whose origins are in the distant past,  
    will come from you on my behalf.“

There was another criterion. He had to be born of a virgin according to Isaiah 7:14. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Is+7%3A14&version=NIV#fen-NIV-17797a)] a sign: The virgin[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Is+7%3A14&version=NIV#fen-NIV-17797b)] will conceive and give birth to a son, and[[c](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Is+7%3A14&version=NIV#fen-NIV-17797c)] will call him Immanuel.”

Now we don’t know how many people besides Mary would have fulfilled all the genetic and geographic criterion. But Mary not only me the genetic and geographic criterion, she was pure, a virgin like was required and also willing to say yes to a pretty unprecedented event.

Besides the predestined things about Mary and even Joseph, there were predestined events that happened connected to the event. For example, there was a prophesy about a great mourning that would be heard around the time of Jesus birth. Jer 31:15, “A voice is heard in Ramah,  
    mourning and great weeping,  
Rachel weeping for her children  
    and refusing to be comforted,  
    because they are no more.”

This was of course a prediction of the great massacre of babies under 2 years that would be ordered by King Herod. Because of Herod’s threat Jesus’ family fled to Egypt. They only returned after they heard about the death of Herod the Great. But there sojourn in Egypt enabled another prophesy to be fulfilled 11:1 which said, “When Israel was a child, I loved him and out of Egypt I called my Son.” So when you look at God’s plan being fulfilled just in Jesus’ early years, everything was prophesied in such a way that it looks like the playing out of a pre-destined plan. And see, in Jesus’ case all his life events are prophesied right there in the Bible. But what about you and me. What about our lives. While our lives are not specifically refered to in scripture, Ps 139:16 is referring to all human beings when it says, “[Your eyes](http://biblehub.com/hebrew/5869.htm) [have seen](http://biblehub.com/hebrew/7200.htm) [my unformed](http://biblehub.com/hebrew/1564.htm) [substance;](http://biblehub.com/hebrew/1564.htm) [And in Your book](http://biblehub.com/hebrew/5612.htm) [were all](http://biblehub.com/hebrew/3605.htm) [written](http://biblehub.com/hebrew/3789.htm) [The days](http://biblehub.com/hebrew/3117.htm) [that were ordained](http://biblehub.com/hebrew/3335.htm) [for me, When as yet there was not one](http://biblehub.com/hebrew/259.htm) [of them.](http://biblehub.com/strongs.htm)” So as special as Mary and Joseph and Jesus are, whether you look at their life or you look at any one’s life, the speictire seems to say that all the details of our life are ordained before we were even born. Whether you look at Mary or Maggi, it does seem like all our lives are just playing out of an unchangeable destiny.

But there is another completely different way to look at this question. And I want us to consider Mary’s life from the perspective of her own personal choices. There is no doubt that Mary was an exemplary child. When other kids made poor choices around her, she acted with a wisdom beyond her years. I don’t believe the Bible is saying Mary was completely sinless, and yet you can be sure that she did resist temptations unlike most people around her. You can also be sure she was very respectful to her elders and did everything necessary around the house. We also know that she was a pious in her faith and a diligent student of scriptures, because she quotes scripture really well. So all in all, she was an exemplary young lady who was already allowing herself to be lead by the Holy Spirit from a very young age. And when God examined her heart, she finds favor in God’s eyes. Now this is very significant. If Mary was leading a good life simply because she did not have any opportunities to make bad choices, God would not be commending her for her exemplary life. Every human being has to make a choice to resist temptation every day and choose God over the world. You can also be sure that the enemy tried to bring Mary down. But she resisted, chose God over Satan and the world and because she made such good choices, she finds God’s favor and is chosen for this incredible task. Even after she said yes to God, things we not all easy and straight forward. Imagine what would have gone on in her head. You see she was being asked to bear a child in a way that had never been done before. The scriptures does have stories of miraculous pregnancies. Abraham’s wife Sarah bore a child when she was 90 and even Elizabeth her first cousin had just conceived miraculously past her child bearing age. Yet what the angel was telling would happen to her had no precedence even in Scripture. Imagine that! So for Mary to believe it was herself was not easy. But if it was difficult for her to believe, how would others believe especially her fiancée. Further, the punishment for adultery in that culture was to be stoned to death. So Mary was literally risking being stoned to death for no fault of her own. The only thing she could hang on to was God’s promise that the child she would bear would grow up to be the savior of the world. Also that one day she was promised that down in history she would be called blessed among all women. She must have thought, if those two promised have to come true, maybe somehow people have to believe my impossible story and God will protect me and the baby from being killed. Even in the best case scenario, having a baby turns your life upside-down and complicates any plans you may have for yourself. But Mary does not resist the angel. She does not present a series of but what about this and what about that… And Mary definitely does not refuse but is instead ready to sign-up. She tells the angel, “I am the Lord’s hand-maiden, so let what you have said come to pass”. Even when she gets negative news like at the time of Jesus’ dedication at the temple, when Simeon takes Jesus in his hands and says something like this, “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, **35**so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Mary did not protest but pondered these things in her heart and leaned on God to help her get through every day. When you look at the story of incarnation from the perspective of Mary’s choices, well, if it were not the various choices that she made from a very young age, choice to not rebel but to obey, choice to study the scripture sincerely not to skim it, choice to not give in to the many temptations which I am sure the enemy would have tried his best to throw at her, she made a deliberate choice to make the right decision everytime and that changed the course of history.

So the question is, was Mary simply fulfilling destiny or did her consistent good choices make something happen that would never have happened otherwise? CS Lewis asks this question in a more general way about prayer itself. He asks, if God were to bring about a good outcome and if it is what is **supposed to happen** according to God’s plan then will that come to pass, whether we do something or not. On the flip side, if God is going to prevent a bad thing from happening there is nothing that anybody does that will make the bad thing happen not happen? In the book, God in the Dock, CS Lewis answers the question saying, God has allowed us to act in a way that produces results. God has not written all of history in his own hand. While most of the events that take place in the universe are outside our control, not all are. It is like a play in which the scene and the general outline are fixed by the author, but some minor details are left for the actors to improvise. The beauty of this system is this. CS Lewis says, God has given us small creatures the dignity of contributing to the course of events in the universe in two ways. God made matter in the universe in such a way that within limits we can actually do things to it. And also He made his own plan or plot of history subject to a certain amount of free play and can be modified by our prayers.

So, is it all predestination, no. God is giving us a bit of say even in the course of history. “Follow the Lord’ your God, and things will go well with you in the land that God has given you Joshua told his people. Your actions have consequences, both good and bad. I don’t know about you but there is a flip side to power right? Some people might worry about being given power to effect change, because it might turn out to be a big disaster. Imagine being suddenly put in charge of Christmas dinner, if you have never done it before. You might worry about the food getting burnt or people getting sick or all kinds of worst case scenarios. Or even worse, you become a parent and you suddenly have the responsibility of shaping the life of a human being now. I remember this feeling distinctly. And wondering, what if I make a complete mess. I will be ruining a human beings life for ever. Ever wondered what Mary might have thought about raising not just a human being but the savior of the world? Did she every wonder that her parenting may not be perfect, and then what happens if because of her the person who was suppose to be the savior of the world does not become the savior of the world? Can you imagine the pressure of that responsibility? Well, that is where God steps in and says, don’t worry about that, Mary, you have been given tremendous power to effect the world. But that power is limited to not violate the big picture of what God has pre-destined to happen.

That is really Good News is it not? Mary and Joseph would never be able to mess up parenting so much that Jesus would fail in growing up to be the Savior of the world. Donald Trump cannot mess up being President so badly that he will blow up the world by starting a nuclear war in a moment of rage. You and I cannot mess up our responsibilities so badly that the lives of those we care about will be ruined. You know why? Because no matter what we do, God is very much part of our world and He will see to it that history moves exactly in the direction that He had planned from the beginning of time.

This I hope is a source of joy to you this Christmas. Like Mary, when you respond to God’s call, you can be the person who has a tremendous impact on the lives of the people around you and even down through history. But guess what? God’s partnership plan with us also takes into consideration our flaws and limits so even if we don’t get everything right, we can do nothing to mess up God’s perfect pre-destined plan. So feel God’s love for you. Be at peace. Enjoy the season. God is good. God is in charge. Let us pray.