

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Monday, December 24, 2018
Christmas Eve**

THE DIVINE ANCESTRY DNA OF JESUS

Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, we've been looking at the Ancestry DNA of Jesus. We began with John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, the forerunner of the Messiah, the one whose mission was to prepare the way for the Lord. Then we looked at the genealogies of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Matthew giving the ancestral line of Jesus through Joseph (His legal father), and Luke giving the ancestry of Jesus through His mother Mary.

What we discovered in these genealogies is that Jesus, the Savior of sinners, came from a long line of sinners. Humanly speaking, Jesus had the right pedigree to be the long-awaited Messiah and Savior of His people: He was a descendant of David and heir to his throne. He was descended from Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, of the tribe of Judah. The ancestry of Jesus qualified Him to be the promised Messiah. But His ancestry, as we noted, also contained some scoundrels who were guilty of some scandalous sins. In His humanness, as a son of David and a descendant of Abraham, Jesus was like His ancestors – and us – in every way except that He was without sin.

We also saw that the family tree of the Messiah of the Jewish people includes some non-Jewish ancestors – like Tamar the daughter-in-law of Jacob's son Judah, Rahab the Jericho prostitute, and Ruth the Moabite (who has a book of the Bible named for her). Coursing through the body of the Jewish Messiah was non-Jewish as well as Jewish blood.

Tonight we come to the divine Ancestry DNA of Jesus, to the mystery and miracle of the incarnation. Of the Incarnation, of God becoming a human being, theologian J. I. Packer has written: "The Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as this truth of the Incarnation" (Packer, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 33, no. 6). Staggering? Yes. Fantastic? Yes. But this is no fiction.

Martin Luther said: "The mystery of the humanity of Christ, that He sunk Himself into our flesh, is beyond all human understanding" (Luther, *Table Talk*).

Charles Spurgeon said of the Incarnation of Jesus: "Infinite, and an infant" (Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, Vol. 4, 1858). Two mutually exclusive categories were combined in Jesus. He was both infinite, and an infant.

Theologian Dale Bruner describes Jesus as the audible, visible Word (*logos*) who expressed the heart of the usually inaudible, invisible God. He is "God's great Visual Aid." In the third century, the church father Origen used this analogy to explain the Incarnation. He told of a village with a huge statue, a statue so immense that you couldn't tell exactly what it was supposed to represent. Finally, someone made a replica, a miniature of the statue so people

could see the person the statue honored. Origen said: “That is what God did in His Son.” Not that Jesus is in any way less than God or an imitation of God. He is not a “mini-God.” He is truly and fully God. As Paul says in Colossians 1:15, He is the visible icon or image of the invisible God. As Bruner says: “In Christ we have God in a comprehensible way. In Christ we have God’s own personal and definitive visit to the planet” (Bruner, “Is Jesus Inclusive or Exclusive?”, *Theology, News, and Notes* of Fuller Seminary, October 1999, 4).

Practically speaking, Jesus was an ordinary baby. He was born of a human mother in the ordinary way. He ate, He slept. He cried, He did what babies do. He was an ordinary baby. But He was more than an ordinary baby. For He was conceived in the womb of a young virgin – a teenaged girl who had never had sexual relations with a man – by the agency and power of the Holy Spirit. Which means that Jesus was unlike any other child ever born.

The announcement of God’s plan for Mary to give birth to God’s Son came separately to both Mary and Joseph in the Galilean town of Nazareth. Nazareth in those days was not like a town as we think of it today. It was more like a small village, not unlike the village of Rockland, PA, where I grew up. We actually lived at Smith’s Corners, three miles from the village of Rockland. Rockland had a general store, a gas station, a fire hall, a church, an elementary school, and a cluster of houses.

Mary Sue and I have been to Nazareth. Maybe some of you have, too. When we visited Israel in 2015, our tour bus driver, Bashir, was an Arab Christian from Nazareth. He actually took our group – all 40 of us – to his home in Nazareth for tea and baklava. He had a beautiful home built on a hillside in Nazareth. It seems he had won the Israeli lottery and no longer needed to work, but he enjoyed driving for tour groups. In case there is any doubt, I do *not* recommend that you follow his example and try to win the lottery.

Nazareth today is far different than it was in the time of Mary and Joseph. Today it is the largest city in northern Israel, with a population of 75-80,000. Back then, it may have had a population of a few hundred.

Back then, Nazareth was not exactly the center of Jewish life and culture. When one of Jesus’ disciples, Philip, told Nathanael about Jesus later on, Nathanael’s response, recorded in John 1:46, reflected the common Judean opinion of Nazareth. Nathanael said: “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?”

Nevertheless, to Nazareth God sent the angel Gabriel, first to Mary, as we read in Luke 1, and then to her betrothed “husband” Joseph in Matthew 1. Mary was a young woman, probably just in her early teens. Joseph was likely older. He was a carpenter. She was just “a country maiden” (Darrell Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, 57). She was a virgin. That is, she had never been sexually intimate with a man. Not with Joseph or anyone else.

Mary and Joseph were engaged or pledged to be married. They were betrothed to one another. Most likely, their marriage had been arranged by their parents, which was the custom in that culture and time. Betrothal was much more serious and more binding than getting engaged is in our culture today. Today, you can break off an engagement without any

legal or religious repercussions. In that day, though, the betrothal, which usually lasted a year, was so binding that it could only be broken by a formal divorce. If your fiancé(e) died during the year of your engagement, you were considered a widow(er). Even though they did not live together and had no sexual union during the betrothal period, the man and woman were considered husband and wife, which explains why Joseph is called Mary's "husband" in Matthew 1:19. And also, why Joseph, when he learned that Mary was pregnant, decided to divorce her (1:19).

As familiar as most of us are with the Christmas story, we may be a bit desensitized to the scandalous way it all unfolded. Joseph and Mary were on the fast track to marriage. But then Mary got pregnant. There were only a few possibilities. Joseph and Mary could have been fooling around before their official wedding day. People in Nazareth, their families included, would have frowned on that. Mary could have been fooling around. That would have been even worse – cheating on your intended. Or someone may have forced himself on Mary. But there is no hint of such a thing in the Scriptures. And the Gospel writers make it clear that both Mary and Joseph had been chaste. Neither of them had been involved in any sexual hanky-panky. They had resisted the temptation to jump the gun.

When Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, he faced a dilemma. He had three options:

- 1) He could shame Mary publicly, letting the world know that he had nothing to do with the disgrace she had brought on herself and her family.
- 2) He could do the kinder, more compassionate thing and divorce her quietly, without making a big, public spectacle about it. Or ...
- 3) He could assume responsibility for her pregnancy and marry her anyway, even though he knew he was not her baby's father.

He had decided on option 2 – to divorce her quietly, without exposing her to public shame, though tongues were sure to wag anyway. But then Gabriel intervenes and persuades Joseph not to end his relationship with Mary.

First to Mary and then to Joseph, Gabriel explains that Mary's pregnancy cannot be explained by the normal means. It is a real pregnancy, but Mary's child was conceived without the involvement or intervention of a man in any way. This child, Gabriel said, was from the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:35). Mary, though still a virgin, was pregnant with the Son of God.

Here, of course, is where we veer into the realm of both mystery and miracle. We cannot explain *how* it happened. The idea, not unknown in some pagan religions, of the sexual mating of a deity with a human, is totally not in the picture. There are no sexual overtones here. That is not how it happened.

In explaining to Mary what would happen, Gabriel speaks, as one Bible scholar puts it, "with reverent reserve" (Leon Morris, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentary: Luke*, 35).

Without going into scientific detail, Gabriel indicates that Mary's conception and pregnancy will be a God-thing. It will be the result of divine activity, not human.

Physically, Jesus was Mary's son. He was, as the Apostles' Creed affirms, "born of the Virgin Mary."

Legally, He was Joseph's son. Joseph was not Jesus' biological father. Jesus was not Joseph's biological son. Jesus had no human father. Legally, though, He was Joseph's son. Which is why the genealogy of Joseph matters.

Ultimately, though, Jesus was God's Son. Unlike anyone else who ever lived, Jesus has a divine Ancestry DNA. He is not only truly and fully human. He is truly and fully God. It is, in the words of David Platt, "the most extraordinary miracle in the whole Bible" and "the most remarkable mystery in the whole universe" (Platt, *Exalting Jesus in Matthew*, 17).

Let the mystery and the miracle sink in this Christmas.

And remember why Jesus came. In 1978, a seven-year-old boy slipped off a wharf and fell into the Prairie River in Canada. At least a dozen adults saw him struggle in the water for a few moments before he drowned. But no one jumped in to save him. Why? Just upstream was a plant that dumped raw sewage right into the river. People knew the river was polluted, dangerously hazardous to your health. So nobody jumped in to try to save the drowning boy.

It may seem at times as if God is like those onlookers standing on the wharf of the Prairie River. You may feel like God is saying: "I'm not jumping into the mess of your life until you get out of the putrid river. Clean up your act first, and then I'll accept you and love you."

But that is exactly what God is *not* like. He did not and does not wait for us to clean ourselves up and fix what's wrong with us. He took the initiative in His mercy and grace to jump into the rotten, polluted, sin-infested river of our lives, in order to rescue us from the mess of sin, sorrow, and brokenness we have made of this life. God sent His Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, to die for us. To bring us back into a right relationship with Him. To clean us up and heal our brokenness. (Adapted from Matt Woodley, "The Christmas Plunge," www.preachingtoday.com.)

He did this for you. He did this for me.

The angel told Joseph to give Mary's baby the name Jesus, which means "The Lord saves," because He – Jesus – will save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

This is the reason Jesus came. It is the reason He came for you. Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift! (2 Corinthians 9:15).

Trusting in Jesus and rejoicing in Him, may you have a Christmas filled with love and joy and hope and peace. Lord, let it be so. Amen.