

Evergreen | Reclaimed

Aaron Brockett | Matthew 1:16

Alright, Merry Christmas everybody. How are you doing? It's good to see you today. Man, we want to welcome you. We are one church right now gathering in multiple spaces and places around our great city. So I want to say hello to each and every one of our campuses, those of you who are joining us from North, our Downtown campus, West, those of you here at Northwest.

I just got word that this room here at Northwest is so full we have people sitting in overflow upstairs. So if you happen to be sitting in overflow... Can we just let them know how much we appreciate them? Come on. Include them in. We're glad to have you guys. So thankful to have you here.

This is a big, big deal to us and if you're a guest, maybe you are visiting family—you're from out of town. Man, we want to welcome you especially if you got an invite maybe from a co-worker or a friend to come to a Christmas service. We are absolutely thrilled that you are here.

I'm sure that many of us have probably heard of this phrase in some context before. The phrase is simply: style over substance.

I don't know how that phrase hits you or how you feel about it. It's got a little bit of a negative connotation to it, sort of like maybe you look good on the outside but you're covering up some stuff on the inside.

I'm just kind of curious. How many of you would be courageous enough to self-identify right now as a style person? You're like, "I care about what I look like." Some of you are afraid to answer this question because you think this is a set up. You're like, "You are trying to get me to admit that I'm a shallow person in church and I'm not going to do it." I get that.

This is not a trick question. Just loud and proud—those of you style people in the room come on, at all of our campuses, raise your hand if you care about what you look like. There you are! There you are. I saw you when you came in. You're looking good.

Those of you who would not consider yourself that, notice the hands that went up around you. I bet you that they'll be happy to give you some pointers if you hang around after the service is over.

Now, how many of you would kind of go the other way and say, "Well, I'm more like a substance person. I don't really care that much about fashion and trends just as long as it's clean and presentable," how many of you? Come on, substance people where are you? We

need you. There you are. There you are. Those are the responsible people right there. Those are the people who pay the bills and give us wise counsel. We need you.

Now, how many of you in the room are a little bit irritated that I'm making you choose between the two? Right? You're like, "I don't think I like this. You're trying to get me to admit that I'm either a shallow person or that I'm just sort of out of touch and I don't like it." If that's you, I'm with you. I don't want to choose between style and substance.

I think if we were to be really honest, none of us are really what we present to others on the outside. I'm not even saying that we're faking it or being a fraud. It's just that we don't necessarily air out everything to other people. There's a fair amount of wisdom in that.

I think that out of all of the holidays that we celebrate during the year, Christmas has the most style. With all of the decorations and the lights and the music and the festivities—there's just so much style to Christmas.

I think that one of the central figures that contributes to a lot of that style Jolly Old St. Nick, you know Santa Claus. He kind of pictures the style of Christmas. And what you may or may not know about him—regardless of how you feel about him—is that the historical basis for Santa Clause was a guy by the name of St. Nicholas. He was a bishop who lived during the 4th Century in Myra in Asia Minor.

St Nicholas came from a wealthy family and he liked to give gifts away to people in need. They would often distribute food in a famine. He was always thinking of others. He was an incredible guy.

In A.D. 325—so about 300 years after the life of Jesus—St. Nicholas gets invited to a meeting of church leaders. The point of the meeting was to discuss the person of Jesus, more specifically should Jesus be at the center of everything. And there was a bishop in the room named Arias who didn't feel that Jesus should be. Arias just thought that Jesus was another good, moral teacher or a philosopher but he didn't believe that he was the Son of God. And he wanted to remove Jesus from the center of our conversations.

Well, all of the bishops are kind of listening patiently and quietly to Arias do his thing. And St. Nicholas is kind of sitting in the back getting agitated. His blood starts to boil at some of the things that he hears Arias saying. So he walks down to the platform where Arias is, rears back in front of everybody and lays Arias out with a left hook. You heard me right. Santa punched a guy in the mouth. I've heard of *Deck the Halls* before but deck the heretical bishop is another one, you know?

I love that story because there is just kind of a realness to it. There is sort of a substance to St. Nicholas. Now, none of us would defend punching somebody in the mouth to get something done, but that meeting and more specifically that moment turned out to be really pivotal because that meeting was actually something called the Council of Nicaea.

And out of the Council of Nicaea (some of you know this) the Nicene Creed was produced. And what the Nicene Creed is—some of you are familiar with that, maybe you've memorized it. If you haven't heard of it that's okay.

The Nicene Creed is actually a creed that we've held onto in church history. Basically the whole purpose of it is to communicate the centrality and the purpose of Jesus—that Jesus' birth, his death, and his resurrection are the center of everything. That Jesus' birth, his death, and his resurrection reconnect us back to God. Even more specifically that Jesus' life is a statement of how loved you really are and how much worth you really have in the eyes of God.

See, as it turns out, Christmas is much more than just style, there's a lot of substance to Christmas. In fact, the very first Christmas splits time in two. All of human history is divided into what came before Jesus' birth and what has come after Jesus' birth.

If you are visiting with us, we've been in this Christmas message series over the past month called *Evergreen* and basically what we've been doing is we've just been looking at the birth of the Messiah—we often do that at Christmastime, but most of the time we usually go to Luke when we do that.

Now, out of the four gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all four of them, their purpose for writing was to introduce us to who Jesus is and how he came. And they all do it a little bit differently.

Luke is where we normally go for the style of Christmas, more specifically the Nativity Scene with Mary and Joseph and the manger—no room in the Inn. Baby Jesus is in the manger, the farm animals, the star, the shepherds—the whole deal—and it's beautiful and it's picturesque the way that Luke writes and gives it to us. And I'm thankful for it.

Matthew, on the other hand, gives us more of the substance of Christmas. Matthew kind of takes us behind the scene and he tells us some stories that are kind of messy, some stories of some people's lives who are broken. They don't have all of the answers.

Growing up I just didn't appreciate it because Matthews version of Christmas is just a bunch of names that are hard to pronounce. But now that I'm a little bit older, I really value Matthew's version of Christmas. He's basically giving us all of these names. It's Jesus' family tree, these men and women who were his great-great grandparents. And when you look at the stories behind the names, there is a lot there. It's God's statement to you and to me.

In fact, one of the things we like to say around here is behind every name is a story. You're not just a name. You're not just a face in the crowd. You're not just another number. You're life is a story that God is telling and it has incredible worth and value.

We've just been walking through some of the lives of these ordinary people in Jesus' family tree. And today for this Christmas Eve service, I want to look at the young woman who was chosen to be Jesus' mother. More specifically, I want to look at the details around her story.

I'm going to read from Matthew, chapter 1, beginning in verse 16. This maybe very, very familiar to you even if you don't find yourself in church a lot or maybe you don't know the Bible super well. You probably know the gist of this story. You've probably heard it before. We, maybe, read it every Christmas.

But what I want you to do is just pay attention to the circumstances that are less than ideal, and that's putting it mildly. And if you were really going to have somebody in a position of Mary to give birth to the Son of God, then you would just tell the story differently. But notice how all of this goes down.

Matthew, chapter 1, verse 16: "Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. **Mary** gave birth to Jesus, who is called the Messiah. This is **how** Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was **engaged** to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was **still a virgin**, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

"As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. 'Joseph, son of David,' the angel said, 'do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet: 'Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'

"When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus."

So this is the way that this all goes down. And I just want you to imagine just for a moment what Mary might have been feeling, not only on that first Christmas but in the days and even in the years to follow.

I mean, it's not like God took volunteers for the job. You know if you're thinking about this today, if God were to choose a young lady to bring the Messiah into the world you might choose her the way that we often have a tendency to choose winners today. We'd just like do a reality show, right? Like *America's Got Talent* or *The Voice*—maybe God would just do a reality show: *Who Wants to Give Birth to the Messiah?* And you'd just have all of these young ladies come and audition and then you'd pick the best one.

But that's not how it all went down. God comes to this young, inexperienced, bewildered girl who is just getting started in life. I mean, Mary was a teen-ager. Maybe you knew that but maybe you've forgotten it. When I say teen-ager, I'm not say like 19 getting ready to turn 20. I mean more like 14, maybe 15. She would have been insecure. She wouldn't have fully known who she was just yet.

It's not like God consulted her or sent an angel to say: Hey, Mary. What do you think about this? I want you to give some thought to this and tell me if you're in or not. No, he just placed the responsibility on her shoulders.

And I don't want to take anything away from Mary. You know, oftentimes, whenever we've seen images of Mary or an artist's portrayal of what we might think that she looked like—have you ever noticed that she looks so poised? So confident and calm and serene and in control...

And like I said, I don't want to take anything away from her because I think she was one of the most courageous human beings to walk the planet. But I also know that she was human. I also know that she had real fear. I also know that she's just like the rest of us and there were probably moments and times when she wondered if she really had what it took.

I mean, the angel comes and says: Mary, you're going to give birth to this child and he's going to save the people from their sins, he's going to be the hope of the world—talk about pressure. Now I don't know about those of you who are parents in the room... Let me hear from those of you who are parents in the room, alright? We heard from the kids earlier. Yeah, you're tired. You can barely muster the energy to clap right now. I get it.

I've got four kids at home and I love my kids. It is one of the greatest blessings in my life to be a father to four kids. At the same time it is, hands down, the hardest job I've ever had and there are plenty of moments when I wonder if I'm doing it right.

You know, I had to take a driver's test to get a driver's license. I didn't have to take a test to have a kid. That's kind of scary. It's like there are moments when I think I need to stop saving for their college fund and I need to start a therapy fund—that's what I need to do so that way they can recover, one day, from all of the ways that I'm messing them up. And yet I hope that they all grow up to do incredible things.

I look at each one of them and I think that they have the potential to change the world. But I'm pretty confident that even though they are going to grow up and do amazing things that none of them are the Messiah—very confident of that, alright?

So could you just imagine? I'm sure that Mary had her moments when she was like: Did God pick the right girl? Moments when she lost her temper, moments when Jesus just was not cooperating—like she's trying to get him into the tub to get cleaned up and he just will not soak in the water. He's like walking around on top of the water. It's like: Jesus, would you get yourself under the water. I'm not impressed. I'm not impressed, young man.

That is such an old joke but it gets laughs every time, alright? And I'm thankful you laughed. That's the seventh time I've used that one.

See, I think that there were probably moments when Mary had these three questions that were rolling around in her mind and in her heart that oftentimes were condemning her. And these three questions that I think Mary wrestled with, I feel that there's a good chance that you're wrestling with them right now even though, perhaps, we don't know each other. We've never met.

But I know that these are three questions that I have wrestled with and I continue to wrestle with. As a matter of fact, I would say right now these questions are usually always in the back of my mind. I think they are in the back of all of our minds, because these three questions really mark us as human beings. This is what it means to be human. It's the stuff we wrestle with on the inside.

And I think that the first question that Mary wrestled with beginning the evening that the angel came and announced this news to her was simply this question: Why is this happening?

Why is this happening? She wanted to have the faith. She wanted to be obedient to what it was that God was asking her to do, but you know that inside—the substance of who she was—she was just questioning it.

Can I just ask you today, on this Christmas Eve as we're bring the close to a year down, 2018, and as we're beginning to launch into another year, can you ask that question in any area of your life? Why is this happening?

Maybe it would be something that you're presently wrestling with. Maybe it's something that has happened in the past year. And you ask, "Why did that happen?" And it's like, "Where was God in that moment?" Or, "Why am I going through this?" Or, "Is God trying to punish me? Did I make the wrong decision here?" I think that Mary was asking that.

I think that very quickly leads to the second question: What am I supposed to do?

What am I supposed to do now? What am I supposed to do next? So, here I am in this moment—and many of us would phrase it like, "What's the will of God for my life?" Or, "What decision should I make?" Or, "What job should I take?" Or, "Where should we move." A number of decisions that you've got in front of you, it's like, "What am I supposed to do next?"

And it very quickly leads to this third question that many of us don't want to ever verbalize but it's with us a lot. It's: Am I enough?

Am I really enough? Not what I can do. Not what I can accomplish. Not what I can earn. Not who I know. Am I enough? Do I have worth just because of who I am? Am I loved unconditionally? And many of us are, perhaps, afraid to ask that question.

I would say that those three questions really define what it means to be human. If you're not asking those questions, there is probably something wrong with you or you're just not being honest. It's within all of us. It's the substance of who we are.

And I would say the answer to those questions is a defining moment. It's an opportunity for us to grow. It's an opportunity for us to cling to hope. It's an opportunity for us to know why we are here.

But if we don't handle those questions well, those are opportunities for condemnation and we begin to feel worse about ourselves or we begin to spiral down into a really dark place. Maybe this is what is at the root of some of our wrestling matches with anxiety and depression.

So I would contend that when Jesus was born 2,000 years ago the Nativity Scene was God's answers to those questions. That when Jesus came, God was making a statement of your infinite worth and your value and he would say: I've not come to condemn you, I've not come to be those voices in your head that would tell you that you're not enough, I've come to actually lighten the load. I've come to actually tell you that you're not alone in this space and in this place.

I love John 3:16, it's perhaps a verse that you've memorized or you'll know it when I start saying it. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

I memorized that as a kid but I don't ever remember memorizing the next verse, verse 17. And I should have because I love it. Verse 17 says this: "God sent his Son into the world not **to judge** the world, but **to save** the world through him."

And I love how John phrases that because it's perfect. He says: God didn't send Jesus into the world to condemn you, God didn't send Jesus into the world to judge you, and God didn't send Jesus into the world to tell you how bad you are.

However, he also didn't send Jesus into the world just to reassure you. He didn't send Jesus into the world just to affirm you or to tell you that you're good enough and you're smart enough and dog-gone-it people like you. That's not why Jesus came.

He says that Jesus came to save and that implies that there isn't anything that we can do to save ourselves. We are in this position in which we need a Savior. And all of this is found in the names of Jesus. Did you know that the name Jesus literally means: "God saves"?

For the longest time when I was growing up I always thought that Christ was his last name: Like Jesus Jeffrey Christ, right? That has kind of a nice ring to it. But Christ is not his last name. Christ means: “Set apart for a task”. So right there in Jesus’ name, Jesus Christ, is God saves and that’s the task for which he came. He was laser focused upon it and you see it all throughout his life and his ministry.

The disciples didn’t understand it. They actually wanted him to run for political office. The religious leaders didn’t understand it. People wanted him to perform miracles. And Jesus didn’t just come to do tricks. That’s why he would heal somebody and he would say: Hey, don’t talk about this. He wasn’t interested in people following him for what he could do for them. He was interested in coming to save. That was the primary purpose, that’s why Jesus came.

And then the third name, which is found in our passage, is Immanuel, which means: “God with us”. In other words, God does not save at a distance. God does not stand back and say: I don’t want to get your mess on me. No, God was willing to jump right in, head first, into our humanity, which is what the family tree of Jesus is all about.

Ever try to save somebody at a distance? It doesn’t really work. If somebody were to fall into a swimming pool, maybe they can’t swim—what’s the most effective way to save? It’s to jump in. It doesn’t really do a whole lot of good for you to stand on the side and say: “Come on. You can do it. I’m right here for moral support.” You know the most effective way to help is to jump in.

You know the most effective way to encourage somebody isn’t to just send them a text or to write them a letter. Those can help but to actually say, “Hey, you know what? I’m on my way over. We’ll sit down together. We’ll make eye contact. I’ll be with you. Now, I don’t know fully what to say, but I’m here.”

That’s the name Immanuel. God says: I’m going to come right into your situation so all of those moments of condemnation that you wrestle with by yourself, when you wonder why is this happening, what am I supposed to do next, and am I enough—really those are questions of am I worth it? Do I have value? Am I loved unconditionally, not for just who I know and what I accomplish and what I earn? The Nativity Scene is God’s statement that says: Yes, you have infinite worth and value. You are more loved than you can possibly imagine.

See, I don’t know if you will be in church next week or not. I don’t know if it will be next Christmas before we’ll see you again. I hope we do and I’m glad that you’re here regardless of where you stand with God right now. But the way I see it, I kind of got you right now and while I’ve got you right now, I just want to take the opportunity not to say anything to condemn you or to judge you or to make you feel ashamed of yourself—I, more than anything, just want you to know that you are more loved than you can possibly know. I want you to know that you have more worth to the God of this universe than you may have possibly ever heard and it’s because of the birth of Jesus Christ.

God says: I'm not just going to save at a distance. This isn't going to be transactional. Jesus isn't just going to get beamed down like Scotty, do his thing and get beamed up. He came into the world the way that every single person in this room came into the world—human birth. And he experienced every temptation and struggle and emotion that you and I have experienced so that way Jesus can say with integrity that there isn't anything that you have experienced that he hasn't either: I've come to identify with you. I've come to send a message that you are more loved than you can possibly imagine.

So many times, as a church, we mess that message up. Who wouldn't want to believe in that? So many times we just think—well, it just means that I've got to get my act together. I've got to stop being naughty and I've got to be nice. As we say around here all of the time, Jesus didn't just come to make bad people good, Jesus came to make dead people alive. He wants your heart.

And when he's got your heart, it's actually a joy to follow after him. You are actually being more you than you've ever been in your entire life because you're following after your Creator, your Heavenly Father. It's the best gift that you could ever get at Christmas.

Jesus would say: Listen, I've done everything that is sufficient for you to be saved. Man, all that you've got to do is rest in that. And all he wants is a relationship where you begin to walk with him. And I just wonder maybe on this Christmas if there would be anybody listening at any of our campuses who would just simply say this: "I'm at least ready to open myself up to that fact that this is really true.

Maybe you wouldn't go all in yet. Maybe you would say you believe everything about the Bible just yet. Maybe you would say, "I've still got a ton of questions." That's totally fine. That's why the most commonly used analogy in the Scriptures for a relationship with Jesus is a walk. He just simply says: Go on a walk with me. Just invite me in to these spaces and places in your life in this next year, in 2019, and just see what I might do because Jesus has come to save and Jesus has come to be with us. That was the task for which he came.

I love the story of the grandfather who goes over to his daughter's house for Christmas and when he walks in the door his two-year-old grandson was in the other room screaming his lungs out. Immediately the grandfather wants to just go in and pick him up and comfort him but his daughter stops him and she says, "Dad, no. He's in time out. He's was acting out earlier and we can't go in to pick him up just yet. Just give it a few minutes. I'll tell you when you can go in and you can grab him." Well, this grandfather he doesn't get to see his grandson very often. It's Christmas and he's just like, "Oh, this is killing me. I want to go in and comfort my grandson."

A few minutes go by and the two-year-old boy calms down. She doesn't hear him screaming or crying anymore. So she decides to go in and check on him. She peers around the corner and that's when she sees her father who has climbed up and into the Pack 'n Play. This thing is threatening to implode in on itself and he's sitting there comforting his grandson. It's like, if I can't pull my grandson up and out of that, then I'll go to him.

I love that story because that's just the heart of our Father. He says: Would you just invite me into your life? Would you just invite me into the middle of those three questions? Would you let me answer those questions for you? I love you that much.

You see, what Jesus came to bring was light. That's why we string lights everywhere at Christmas. Jesus came not only to illuminate our path and illuminate our hearts but to help us to have this lens by which we might see the rest of the world.

And what I love about Christmas is that Jesus came to be light, and so that light gets ignited in our hearts and then it spreads from one person to another. And I'm not talking about proselytization. I'm talking about just giving hope. See, the most common response to people who have met a Savior is that they are hopeful and they are helpful.

And I love those two words to define who we are as a church, to be hopeful because we have every reason to be hopeful. And to be helpful. That's part of what our year-end offering is about. We want to give to an organization called Hands of Hope to help give hope to children in our city who don't have families. You've been hearing us talk about that over the last month and I want to encourage you to participate in that year-end offering. It's just one way for us to bring hope and help to a watching world.

So today we're going to end our Christmas Service time, this is my favorite moment of my favorite service during the year. It's the Christmas candle lighting. I want to just ask you to grab that candle that you hopefully got when you walked in. We're going to stand to our feet here in a moment. We're going to light the candles and watch the light spread across the room at all of our campuses. And we're going to lift our voices and sing some Christmas carols together.