

“When God Comes Down”

Matthew 1:18–25

Pastor Bruce Stallings

December 24, 2018 • Christmas Eve Communion Sermon

Our text for this communion service is in Matthew 1 and we’ll focus on the birth of our Savior and how that matches up with the partaking of communion. Matthew 1:18–25 says *[18] Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. [19] And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. [20] But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. [21] She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” [22] All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:*

*[23] “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel”*

(which means, God with us). [24] When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, [25] but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Many years ago I was born in Huntsville, Alabama to a family of six. I have an older brother (by 18 months) and an older sister plus a sister that is younger than me. My brother and I were pretty rambunctious and got into a lot of messes. When we moved to Birmingham we were small boys and had to live in an apartment for a year. My brother and I were singlehandedly responsible for my dad completely losing his security deposit on this apartment. That apartment was just too small for us and my dad decided to look for some farm land or a dog house a ways from the house where my brother and I could be raised but my mom would not agree to that. So he did the next best thing and bought a house with a cinder block wall basement, cement floors and metal poles. You would hurt yourself down there before you would hurt the house. We called that basement the dungeon and we were destined to grow up there because of how often we were in trouble.

At times my dad would holler down to us in the basement and we’d come up as quickly as possible so that he would not come down but on occasion when he would open the door to the basement he would begin to descend down those 20 something stairs leading down to the basement. My dad was a heavy set man so even though he may be coming to give a wonderful hug which I don’t ever remember that happening, we would have been afraid just because of the way he would have been coming down the stairs. He was also a very intentional man so when he wanted us to be afraid he knew how to walk down the stairs. As he did come down those stairs the conversations between me and my brother was about wondering what my dad knew. We were way past whether we did anything wrong but it was which wrong thing does he know that we did.

One time as my dad was coming down those stairs we could tell he was frustrated and as soon as he opened the door I began to confess everything that we had done plus the stuff we had thought about doing. My dad was frustrated because my sisters had blown the fuse from running all sorts of things to try and get their hair to look decent and so he was coming down to fix the fuse box but as I confessed to all these things it ended up with us getting a whipping. As soon as

my dad left my brother tackled me to the ground for all I confessed and my dad came back in and we got another whipping so you get the picture. So we tried to interpret simply by my dad coming down the stairs what was about to happen.

I had the privilege this past fall to go through a study with some people where we looked at from the Old and New Testaments special encounters with God. We believed from our study that the more we learned about God the more we'd learn about ourselves and our relationship to God as well. So we looked at some of the unique encounters in Scripture of how man interacts with God and the most unique encounters would be times when God would come down to earth to interact with man. As we went through this study we got an accurate picture of God but perhaps not one that we would typically think of about God.

For instance, there is the time God interacts with Moses on Mount Sinai through the burning of a bush but the bush not being consumed by the fire. We would try to understand through this what God was trying to communicate and how they were supposed to respond to what He was communicating. We saw Him again at Mount Sinai after the nation of Israel had gotten out slavery. God comes down from the mountain and this time you have thought He was mad. You would have confessed to everything because the mountain literally shook, smoke filled around the mountain and there was thunder and lightning. There were trumpet blasts but no trumpets. The people heard the voice of the Lord and they were scared to death of God. God began to reveal His power and He is about to give them the Ten Commandments. So there is a reason God revealed Himself in this way in all of His power and majesty.

We looked at another occurrence where Christ Himself came down – the Commander of the Army of the Lord – who meets Joshua on the plains of Jericho right before the battle of Jericho. Christ reveals Himself as the Commander of the Army of the Lord. He didn't reveal Himself as the Lamb as He does in other places but here to Joshua it was as the Commander of the Army of the Lord and He reveals His sovereignty. Joshua asks Him 'Are you for us or against us?' His answer is 'no, I'm the Commander of the Army of the Lord.' In other words, there is a whole other plain of who I am that you're not even thinking about. You're thinking through your own lens in this world.

We began to see this powerful God, this God of wrath and these unique encounters. One of my favorite Old Testament stories in the Bible is when Joshua had a battle at Gibeon. In this story it says the Lord killed more people in the battle by hailstones than man killed with the sword. You see this phenomenal power of God being revealed and His will being unfolded in a very unique way even to the degree that He literally stopped the sun and moon so that there was a double day. He impacted the entire world just by His will, just by His voice where He spoke it into being and He can stop it from spinning.

Anyone who has ever studied astronomy would tell you that if the earth ever stopped spinning everything would burn up. They would say that wouldn't work but it does if the Person who created it and who is over all of it, says 'stop.' Only God can do that. With that picture of this amazing, powerful God that has the ability to speak anything into existence, then what did God do when He found out that man had ruined His perfect creation?

In Genesis 3 when God gives that rule of not eating of the tree of Good and Evil or you will surely die and man violates that command. God understand the ramifications of what man had done far better than man did. All man knew was that he had violated the law of God and he felt ashamed. What God knew at that point, was all the sin that was to come and what it was going to take in order to redeem man from all this sin that he had just ushered in. So what did God do?

He certainly didn't do what I would have expected Him to do and that would have been to clean the slate and start over. He came down. In Genesis 3 it says that God was to come meet them and He was coming in the manner that He had been meeting with them – to come and walk with them in the cool of the day. Genesis 3:9–11 says [9] *But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"* [10] *And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."* [11] *He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"*

When God asks a question it is not to get information. God is not asking 'where are you' because He can't find Adam and Eve. He made Adam and Eve. He knows the answer to 'where are you' but He also knows the answer to 'who told you that you were naked.' He knows the answers to all the questions He asks yet even though He knows the ramifications, God came down.

In our recent study we found out that there are two characteristics that God portrays each time He comes down that I think sometimes in our finite mind these two characteristics are at odds with each other, that they can't co-exist. The two characteristics are the holiness of God and the grace of God.

When God came down to Moses at the burning bush, He told Moses to take off his sandals for the ground that he was standing on was holy ground. He told them at Mount Sinai that if they touched the mountain they would die. This wasn't because God made up a new rule but it's because it's holy. He is saying this in a holiness standpoint but also in a gracious standpoint. When God comes down He never diminishes His holiness in order to relate to us but at the same time He is gracious and praise the Lord that He doesn't diminish who He is but we tend to think that He does.

He has this high standard of holiness that He holds out to Adam and Eve, Moses, Joshua and the nation of Israel while at the same time He is being gracious. At Mount Sinai one of His acts of graciousness was to warn them not to touch the mountain and another was to give them the Ten Commandments. To actually tell them what sin is, is one of the gracious things a holy God could ever do. If He didn't tell us what sin was I would have to argue that we have a cruel God but God is not trying to trick us He is trying to help us. God gives us the law so as He comes down He comes down in His holiness but at the same time we see His grace.

When He came down to the Garden we see His holiness in the standard that had to be kept and yet we see His grace as He goes after them to remove them from the Garden because in the Garden was also the tree of eternal life and God did not want them to spend eternity in their sin so He bars them from the Garden to protect them.

What about when God comes to the point of redemption and sending His Son and he comes down as Immanuel, God with us? God understands that man not only ushered sin into the world but man has mastered sin now. I will send My Son to them and they will crucify Him. They will misunderstand Him and these will be the very people He has chosen. These people that I have blessed will take advantage of these blessings and they will be unfaithful to Me but I will come down in holiness and grace and that is why we have this Communion Table.

We partake of communion to remember God coming down as Immanuel – literally holy God with sinful man. That is not supposed to work. Scripture even says a holy God cannot have fellowship with sinful man unless the holy God finds the way for that to happen and that is through the birth of His Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. We see His holiness because He had to be holy to be the acceptable sacrifice for our sin. His birth is dependent on His holiness and yet He is clearly gracious just by Him coming through the manger and dying on the cross.

The manger and the cross go together because the manger exists for the purpose of the cross. He came to die that He might pay the penalty for our sins and God still puts that standard of holiness before us, but in graciousness He knows we can't be holy in and of ourselves. Therefore He gives us a Perfect Sacrifice, His Son, and in Him you can have that personal relationship with God.

I hope that as we celebrate the birth of our Savior that you can't see the manger without seeing the cross or understand God coming down without seeing His holiness and His grace, where He is providing for us what we cannot possibly do for ourselves.

Here are some verses that I love because they are so power packed. I have joined them together. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, Jesus, to save His people from their sins, by making Him Jesus who knew no sin to be sin so that in Him we might be the righteousness of God by believing in Him (through faith and trust in Him), we do not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16, Romans 3:25–26, II Corinthians 5:21).

When God knew that man ruined what He created He came down in holiness, with expectation and in graciousness. When God knew that man had distorted all that God had created, mastered sin, would abuse and crucify His very Son coming as the Savior, God came down – Immanuel, God with us. I don't know what you carry in your heart today or what weighs heavy in your heart or what may cause you to want to hide from God due to shame but I know God's response – He comes down. He wants to meet with you and forgive you of that sin. He desires to do that.

Jesus said He eagerly desired to do this with the Disciples and one part of doing communion with His Disciples would have been their acknowledgment and confession of sins. That is what they have instructed us to do in His Word as we come to the Table. I would encourage you to take a moment and think about your own life and heart. What is it that would give you shame or cause you fear in your life for this to be laid open and presented before the Lord? God is a God who comes down. God is a God who meets us and deals with us with the standard of holiness but with incredible grace that you cannot possibly imagine. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I thank You so much for who You are. Lord, we have but scratched the surface of understanding any aspect of You and Your character. Lord, I thank You that You are a God that comes down and did not just wipe the slate clean and start over but You are a God who is true to Your Word. You are holy, holy, holy. You call us to holiness and yet by acknowledging that we can't be holy in and of ourselves, who gives to us Your Son our Savior Jesus Christ, who is holy, who imparts Your Holy Spirit within us as Your children as believers that Your Spirit would guide us, leads us in that sanctification process. Lord, thank You for inviting us to Your Table, for inviting us to Jesus and to proclaim His death and resurrection until He returns at the Second Advent. Lord, I thank You that You're a God who comes down in holiness and in graciousness and I pray this in Jesus Christ's Name, Amen.