Advent Series: Hospitality Incarnated: What Christ's birth reveals about how we treat others.
Sermon Text: Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:46-56 **Key Words:** Presence, Provision

Churches around the world are celebrating Advent season, which is a word meaning, "*To appear or come into a place*." Together, we're remembering Jesus' first advent while anticipating His final advent. We're calling this series: "*Hospitality Incarnated: What Christ's birth reveals about how we treat others*." Our liturgy (the readings, prayers, songs, and sermons) has been crafted to remind us of God's goodness towards us, so we can be formed by His grace rather than a culture of individualism, consumerism, and self-reliance. We're defining "*hospitality*" as "*The generous treatment of guests.*" It can involve institutions (e.g., hospitals, agencies), but as we discovered last week, God codified it in His law as a relational pursuit to make His people distinct and desirable. Sadly, hundreds of laws and endless examples were unable to change how people treat one another, so God made a peculiar promise through the prophet Isaiah (7:14): "*The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel* (which means '*God with us*')." Our sermon today will explain the impact of this announcement and explore the following…

BIG IDEA: Remembering God's provision changes everything.

Having established Israel's experiences of vulnerability and dependence in our survey of the Old Testament, we can now begin to establish Christ's experiences of vulnerability and dependence. It's a familiar story, right? A faithful Jewish couple was in love and planning their future together until an unplanned pregnancy made them forget God's promises, suffer identity confusion, and grow fearful, uncertain, and self-conscious. What would their strict religious culture say? Had God forsaken them? Could they survive this sudden and shameful turn of events? On some level, we can relate (e.g., life hasn't gone how we planned, God has felt distant, family or friends have rejected us when we needed them most). What helped Mary and Joseph (what will help us) go from hopeless despair to believing that nothing is impossible with God (cf. Luke 1:37)? It was when someone moved towards them and mercifully reminded them of God's presence and provision.

Their story is recorded in ***Matthew 1:18-25***: "***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. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus." I love how they each received an angel visit, so Mary didn't have to take Joseph's word for it. Gabriel assured her their situation was no "*mistake*" or proof that God had forsaken them (Israel). You can read about her visit in ***Luke 1:26-38***, but for the sake of time, feast your eyes on her remarkable response in ***verses 46-56***. After she contemplated and conferred with her cousin, Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist, "***Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever."***"

Isn't that interesting? Hearing God's promises and discussing them with another believer, who it says by the way was filled with the Holy Spirit, helped her recall other things she already knew about God! This is key takeaway: The faith of our spiritual ancestors was always based on and inspired by ancient truths! Ironically, people in our day scour the Bible for "*new concepts*", "*fresh words*", and "*hidden codes.*" No wonder so many are experiencing a "*crisis of faith*" and "*deconstructing faith.*" Our faith can't be strong when we fail to appreciate and evaluate what God has said, when we refuse to embrace mystery, when we oversimplify complex issues, when we avoid relationships, and when we seek our answers from within. What was it that transformed Mary's fear and shame into faith and song? What encouraged Joseph to swallow his pride, let go of his dreams, and risk his reputation to love a lady carrying someone else's baby? This poor, young couple was inspired to travel the path of

most resistance and embrace their place in God's plan by relationships that urged them to consider ancient truths that originated outside of themselves!

Here's another key takeaway: Hospitality (the generous treatment of others) is baked into the story of Christ's birth. Luke 2:7 says, "*Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn*." While traveling to pay their taxes, these vulnerable, soon-to-be parents desperately needed strangers to befriend them. The city was packed with visitors, and let's face it, few were sympathetic to their situation. Is it not stunning that God chose to enter and redeem the world through such dire circumstances? I mean, we usually sideline ourselves (and others) by thinking a holy God wouldn't come near our kind of issues (see notes on Docetism below). Raise your hand if you've ever convinced yourself that God couldn't work in and through you due to your past experiences, recurring failures, or less-than-ideal situation. It's odd that we but such lies when God stuffed Scripture full of stories where He performed miracles for broken people in terrible circumstances! Furthermore, the way Jesus chose to be born begs us to embrace our own vulnerability and dependence. Biblical hospitality requires a vulnerability few seem willing to give or receive. It begins with an open heart--a heart that's been unlocked by a gospel story where everyone involved, including God, became needy. Listen to this comment from Christine Pohl in her book on hospitality: "*Deep sensitivity to the suffering of those in need comes from our ability to put ourselves in their position, and from remembering our own experiences of vulnerability and dependence*." That's what God did! Hebrews 4 says He passed through the Heavens to sympathize with our weakness, and then 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 also says "*God…comforts us in all our affliction to enable us to comfort others in any affliction with the comfort we have received from God*." The story of Christ's birth puts hospitality at the center of our faith. Each year, as the people of God retell and celebrate the Christmas story, we remind ourselves and the world of God's most powerful provision--His presence! And, of course, **Remembering God's provision changes everything**! Not only does it prove that God will never forsake us, but it also inspires us to move towards other broken people and to share the good news that God hasn't given up on them either.

Let's pray: Father, thank you that Jesus left the riches of Heaven and giftwrapped Himself in the skin of a needy baby. His name, Emmanuel, assures us our "*God is with us*" and that "*He is near the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit*" (cf. Psalm 34:18). His life and teachings offer hope to people with messed-up lives. Not only are you willing to redeem us, but as you turn us into a people who treat others generously, you'll also draw others to yourself. Like Mary and Joseph, may we not

let the sorrows of this world cause us to forget your ancient promises, so that we can move forward in faith and share your good news with anyone willing to listen. Amen.

So, what's your NEXT STEP?

- Remember, our next step always begins with faith in Christ. Either placing faith in Him for the first time or exercising faith to repent, change, and grow. Either way, His Spirit will help you.

Quotes related to this passage:

- **Confusion about hospitality**: Today when we think of hospitality, we don't think first of welcoming strangers. We picture having family and friends over for a pleasant meal. Or we think of the "hospitality industry," of hotels and restaurants which are open to strangers as long as they have money or credit cards. Perhaps large churches come to mind, with their "hospitality committees" that coordinate the coffee hour, greet visitors, or help with the parking. In any case, today most understandings of hospitality have a minimal moral component—hospitality is a nice extra if we have the time or the resources, but we rarely view it as a spiritual obligation or as a dynamic expression of vibrant Christianity. (Pohl, 4)
- **Redefining of terms**: "Would you describe your ministry as offering hospitality to strangers?" I asked the founder of a community for rural homeless people. "No, not really," he responded. Surprised, I pressed him further, "Well, then, how would you describe what you are doing?" "We welcome needy strangers into a home environment; we give them a safe place. I think of hospitality as entertaining family and friends; that's not what we're doing." His response echoed Henri Nouwen's observation that, for most of us, hospitality conjures up images of "tea parties, bland conversation, and a general atmosphere of coziness." In past centuries, hospitality certainly would have been the right term to describe my friend's ministry. Welcoming strangers into a home and offering them food, shelter, and protection were the key components in the practice of hospitality. That my friend did not describe his work as hospitality reflects how much the use of the word has changed over the last three hundred years. For the most part, the term "hospitality" has lost its moral dimension and, in the process, most Christians have lost touch with the amazingly rich and complex tradition of hospitality. Henri Nouwen said, "If there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality." (Pohl-3-4)
- **Dependency**: "Those of us with resources can usually avoid depending on the personal hospitality of strangers for food, shelter, and safety. Away from home, we buy our meals and book comfortable hotel rooms. Unless we travel in a foreign country, live through the devastation of a storm or an earthquake, or run into car trouble on the road, we're unlikely to know what it is to be a vulnerable stranger needing someone else's help. In a highly individualistic and commercial society, depending on the generosity of others is difficult and sometimes feels degrading. Whereas in ancient times all strangers depended on someone else's hospitality, today, it is those without resources who depend most on the free provision of food, shelter, and protection that characterizes hospitality… But even those of us who do not depend on hospitality for basic needs know something of the joy of being welcomed warmly. We also know the pain of being excluded." (Pohl, 4)
- **Avoiding hopelessness**: When life becomes difficult, it's easy (for Christians and especially non-Christians) to think God has forsaken us. Remembering God's promises (hearing the good

news of the gospel) can do for us (and everyone we meet) what it has always done. Throughout history, sin has caused people to believe God has forsaken them and to devise schemes to earn His favor. What's interesting in this story of Christ's birth is that God's angel came to Mary and Joseph, not the other way around. Instead of "us coming to Him, rather He came to us (our turf) as a guest (person in need) and a host. That's His biblical pattern (e.g., Eden, the Pillar of fire, the cloud that led Israel). God has always sought to be with us and provide for us even as we rejected Him and struggled to believe that was possible. We saw this in our study of John's letters too…God always makes the first move because He loves us and wants to dwell with us.

- **True change**: Our metamorphosis from sinner to saint often falls short because we fail to appreciate just how far biblical commands go. For example, Ephesians 4:28 says, "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need." In this case, it's not enough to simply "stop stealing" and "start working" because that can be done without a change of heart. True change occurs, in this case, when a person moves toward hospitality. Philip Hallie, an ethicist who spent years studying the human capacity for evil and good, concluded that "the opposite of cruelty is not simply freedom from the cruel relationship, it is hospitality." (Pohl, 12)
- **Docetism**: The term "Docetism" comes from the Greek verb meaning "to seem" or "to appear" (δοκέω, dokeō). It is difficult to delineate the key ideas of Docetism since there was never a distinct "docetic sect" or a clearly stated "docetic theology" from those sympathetic to docetic theology. Nonetheless, there are some christological ideas and theological underpinnings that are common to almost all variations of Docetism in the early Christian period. Perhaps most foundationally, docetic theology rejects the notion that Jesus Christ actually lived in a physical, human body. Instead, docetic theology asserts that Jesus only appeared to take on a human body during His earthly life. The denial of Jesus' bodily existence likely emerged from a dualistic view common in the Hellenistic period that considered physical matter (including the human body) to be inferior to spiritual matter. The denial of Christ's bodily existence is also probably related to the Jewish emphasis on God's transcendence. Thus, docetic theology emphasized the divinity of Jesus while denying the importance of His bodily life on earth. Docetic theology has considerable implications for understanding Jesus of Nazareth and the theological interpretation of His death and resurrection. Most basically, it rejects the possibility that Jesus experienced the breadth of human existence, including pain, eating, drinking, and hunger. More significantly, docetic theology undermines the historic value of Jesus' virgin birth, crucifixion, bodily resurrection, and His assumption of sin in the flesh (compare Rom 8:3). (The Lexham Bible Dictionary)

Quotes related to the larger context:

- **Advent**: Word with Latin roots, meaning 'coming.' Christians of earlier generations spoke of 'the advent of our Lord' and of 'His second advent.' The first phrase refers to God's becoming incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. The latter phrase speaks of Jesus' second coming. In a second sense 'advent' designates a period before Christmas when Christians prepare for the celebration of Jesus' birth. This practice may have begun in some churches as early as the late fourth century. Advent began as a time of fasting. Sermons focused on the wonder of the Incarnation. By the Middle Ages four Sundays had become the standard length of the Advent season. Since then, Advent has been considered to be the beginning of the church year." Fred

A. Grissom and Steve Bond, “Advent,” ed. Chad Brand et al., Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 31.

Bibliography:

- Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
- The Lexham Bible Dictionary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016)
- Christine D. Pohl, Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).
- Ed Robb, Making Room: Sharing the Love of Christmas (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020).
- Steve Corbett, Brian Fikkert, and Katie Casselberry, Helping without Hurting in Church Benevolence: A Practical Guide to Walking with Low-Income People (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2015).

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us about many other resources.

Direction for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the discussion around 30mins. Go for a single, not a home run.
3. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Let’s prepare for our sermon from Matthew 1:18-25: Luke 1:46-56.

- What do you find remarkable and inspiring about in these two accounts?

Let’s apply our sermon from Matthew 1:18-25: Luke 1:46-56.

- In Scripture, the faith of our spiritual ancestors was always based on and inspired by ancient truths! Share some habits and relationships that help fuel your faith by reminding you of God’s promises. Please also share how these have inspired you to keep moving forward in faith.
- The Christmas story reveals that God was willing to become needy, vulnerable, and dependent. According to Hebrews 4:14-15 this enabled Him to sympathize with our weaknesses. Are you willing to do that for others, or do you tend to resist appearing needy? Can you think of a time God used your need or the need of another to reveal Himself? (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Here are some great resources for digging deeper into community group life…

How life together looks http://austinstone.org/stories/film/item/140-missional-community-lukes-story
Rethinking what we do https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvWnXYSELF4&feature=player_embedded
Numerous articles to provoke thought http://toddengstrom.com/archives/
What groups of 2-3 might look like http://toddengstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/LTG-Overview.pdf