

# “Flipped Expectations”

Rev. Hobie Wood

**Series:** *Advent*

**Bible Text:** Matthew 1:18-25

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## **Christ Presbyterian Church**

Physical Address: 801 Roper Dr. Clarkesville, GA 30523

**Website:** [www.cpcclarkesville.org](http://www.cpcclarkesville.org)

**Online Sermons:** [www.cpcclarkesville.org/sermons](http://www.cpcclarkesville.org/sermons)

If you have a Bible, you can be turning to the Gospel of Matthew, we're in chapter one today, if you don't have a Bible that's printed in your worship guide. As Steve said, it's the Sunday when lots of churches turn their attention to the incarnation of the Son of God. We do this as well, we're not much on the church calendar, but it is appropriate and helpful for us to use this moment and to consider what does this mean, what does it mean that God would show up in our world? We're looking at one of the two specific birth narratives of Jesus, this one is in Matthew's Gospel and it comes after something that's really strange to our eyes, a genealogy. Some of you may be into genealogies, I suspect most of you are not. A genealogy is a weird way to start a book about someone that you think is what Matthew will end up saying Jesus is. Some of the scholars argue that the first two chapters are, well the first chapter is Matthew trying to answer the question just from the beginning, who is this? So let's read, remember this is God's word for us, we're starting in verse 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. And her husband Joseph being a righteous 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 he knew her not until she had given birth to a son and he called his name Jesus.*

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

*We do ask oh Lord that as we look at your word, even with its familiarity this time of year, we ask for the illumination of the Spirit. We pray that you would help us to not only see what's true, but to love what's true. We ask that we would not only understand and feel what is true, but*

*that we would be transformed by that truth into people who love and adore and worship you throughout our lives, that we would become hopeful people, Lord, and that you might even use us until the second advent when every eye beholds him and every knee bows down to him. Jesus, we pray in your name, Amen.*

In the popular TV show Parks and Recreation, there is a famous character named Ron Swanson, which if you are familiar, needs no introduction, but for those of you who aren't, a quick sketch of Ron is he is the consummate man's man. He can make anything out of anything. He likes a particular steakhouse called Mulligans. He is introverted to the point of installing an automatic door closer on his office so that he can shut the door before people come in and keep them out. He also has a horror of anyone finding out his personal information. In one episode, which is my favorite, his coworker has found out the date of his birthday, which he's gone to great lengths to hide, not just from her, but from the world. She's known for throwing elaborate birthday parties for her coworkers, and throughout the day, she's essentially telling him a surprise party is coming. She plants the idea with other coworkers. The other coworkers will come up to Ron and ask things like, I need to know, how many cars can you handle in your parking lot? What do you think a double-decker bus could fit there? Is there space for a circus tent, that kind of question? His anxiety is rising. At the end of the episode, he has walked into a room where he's literally wincing, waiting for people to jump out and surprise him. If you've seen the episode, you know. He walks into a room with a table set with a meal and a steak from Mulligans and his favorite movie "bridge over a river quay" on the TV and guards at the door to make sure nobody disturbs him. I'm not certain why this appeals to me so much, but that is a surprise indeed. That is a good surprise, an overturning of all of his expectations.

If we were honest, that's really not how surprises work for us. Most of the time, when we are expecting some good thing to happen, very often it's tinged with five bad things, or it's just underwhelming, it doesn't go like we thought. Rarely are we expecting a bad thing only to be surprised with a good thing. That's atypical in our experience. This is the time of year when everybody around us, it's in all those things, we're celebrating the good surprise of the incarnation. But this passage that we're looking at helps us to understand just exactly how it is, even from the beginning that Christ's coming goes ahead and flips the expectations for us. Those flipped expectations are a cause for rejoicing. We're going to look at two, from scandal to surprise, and then from sin to salvation. Let's talk about those flipped expectations and see if we might find a little bit of reason for rejoicing ourselves.

First, from scandal to surprise.

Matthew's telling us how the birth of Jesus happened, but as I said earlier, before he even gets to these details, he launches into this gigantic genealogy that also mentions Mary and Joseph, her husband. They are part of that genealogy. It extends all the way back to Abraham, and if you were to read it, besides being tripped up over a few names, perhaps, one thing you would have noticed would be a chorus that goes something like this, so-and-so was the father of so-and-so, and so-and-so was the father of so-and-so, and on and on like that, until verse 16, where the

chorus is broken, Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who was called Christ.

Without knowing anything at all, just reading the genealogy, you would hit that point and realize something's changed here, something is unique and different about this particular part of the story, and so when we get to verse 18, we learn Mary's not quite married to Joseph, they are betrothed, engaged. Just background information here, that's fundamentally different than our version of engagement. For us, you can get out any time you want when you're engaged, right, and engagement is a social obligation, it's not a legal obligation. The legal commitment in our day happens on your wedding day when the papers are signed and the vows are taken, et cetera. For them, an engagement was not a social arrangement, it was a legal arrangement. There was still a coming wedding day where the two would come together physically and the wedding would be consummated, but already in verse 19, Joseph is called her husband and they're not married yet, they're just engaged, it's a legally binding arrangement, the only way out is to obtain a writ of divorce.

So you can imagine Joseph's sense of horror and betrayal and shock when in the midst of their legally binding engagement, she is found to be with child, the way that's worded means that it became physically obvious, she began to show. It's public, it's obvious, it's shameful, premarital pregnancy can be a scandal. In our culture, probably depending on your morals and your community and culturally speaking, it's not as much of a scandal as it used to be, it still is though in some places. In their culture, it was absolutely a scandal, kind of a life altering one. Biblically speaking and inside faithful churches, it's always been a scandal because it assumes that there is intimacy that's happened outside the bounds of marriage, which has always been, still is, sin against God and man. There's just no question about that.

The assumption here from Joseph's perspective is my fiancé had an adulterous affair and has gotten herself pregnant. Serious scandal and we know it especially because it's what he thought, look at verse 19, it says he was a just, *a righteous man*, what that means is that he loved the law of Yahweh, the law of the Lord. And if you were a righteous man that loved the law of the Lord, that means you would love Deuteronomy 22, which says if your spouse is adulterous, you not only can but you probably should divorce that spouse, and for them as national ethnic Israelites constituting a nation, adultery was punishable with the death penalty. So for Joseph to be a just and righteous man ordinarily would mean that he'd certainly divorce her and he probably goes to the judge and says take care of business, she should get the death penalty.

Joseph loved the law, he does obey it, but he does this the compassionate way. It says he would do this quietly, he's not going to make a stink about it, he's not going to try to go and get her. In verse 20 it seems like he's still kind of in process when the angel shows up, that's not consistent with the original language, it's much more resolved, it's that he had considered this, he had resolved that he was going to divorce her and then the angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream and then there's this divine reversal, this upsetting of expectation, this reversal of what would be ordinary, the flipping of the script.

The angel gives him the familiar words, *Joseph son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*

Give the man some credit because he actually believes it, right? In our day you're not going to believe it, you're not going to believe it, it's just not going to happen, but this contradiction of Joseph's expectations, he believes it. In our fallen broken world to see your fiancé expecting means that she's been unfaithful, but the Lord says she's not been unfaithful, sin has not occurred, but God has shown up and has done the miraculous. The same spirit who hovered over the face of the deep at creation all the way back in Genesis, the same spirit who would empower specific people to show up and deliver the people of Israel throughout parts of the Old Testament history has now shown up and has done the miraculous, the supernatural in the life of this young woman. She's pregnant without having ever been with a man physically and the story in a moment moves from scandal to surprise. Absolute total flip of expectations.

I've said this before, but one of the great things about the Bible is how it just assumes the supernatural. There's not a chapter and a verse, we as 21st century modern people in the western world, what we would like is that there's a chapter somewhere that starts this way. Now I would like to explain to you the nature of the supernatural and the miraculous. Here's how it works. That's what we would really like to have and you're not going to find that. Rather what you're going to find is account after account that just tells what happened, and what happened happens to be an upsetting of the physical laws of the universe. It just assumes the supernatural.

That can just be really hard for us. It's part of the surprise, the shock of the gospel that there is a God first of all and that he's active in the world and that he has done the miraculous throughout history long before the birth of Christ over and over and over, certainly in the conception of Jesus and of course the miracle of miracles in the resurrection. You have to get to a place where you believe in the miraculous before you can ever be a Christian. It's a really hard thing for modern people like us.

Some of you may not have any problem with the supernatural. For others of you, you might have some trouble and it's for a lot of reasons. Ours has been a skeptical age for 175, 200 years, a lot of different reasons for that. Previous people groups did not struggle to believe that the supernatural was real. If anything, they might have swung too far and there were witches, goblins and devils behind every rock and tree and that they kind of needed to ... It's just a rock, man. Just calm down. That's previous generations. That's not ours. We assume that there's nothing. Lots of reasons. Naturalistic assumptions, certain forms of enlightenment, thought, scientific method, rise of Darwinism, whatever, all of that stuff makes a contribution.

In our day, most people don't believe the supernatural because they don't observe the supernatural very much. It's not part of your lived experience. This might be worse. You have seen something that was called supernatural or spiritual abused, and that made it really hard for you to believe that there could be any possible right use of the supernatural or the spiritual.

My wife and I, when we were first married, we went out west to training for our work and we were going to go to church one Sunday. We didn't know this town. We didn't know any good churches. We saw one somehow called Grace Church and we thought, what could possibly go wrong? Grace Church. It's got it all. We go and immediately, I wasn't sure what we were in for. We walk in the room and there was a lady that was wearing purple in the back of the church and she had a tambourine. We thought, that's different. We grew up in the Baptist world. We didn't have the purple-wearing lady with the tambourine. Then we noticed that, oh, there are tambourines everywhere and egg shakers, kind of on every row. Okay, all right, well, this is different and then during the service they had a child dedication, which, okay, great. You know, we're coming from the Baptist world, child dedication. They dedicate the child to the Lord so far so good and then the minister pronounced seemingly out of the blue, oh, and this child is going to have these incredible musical abilities and he just started to lay them out. He's going to be able to do this and this and this and this and serve the Lord in these ways and the whole place erupted into cheers. I began looking for the escape hatch or wondering, did I miss something in my childhood? Where was my musical ability? I suppose he thought he was doing a form of prophecy, but the way it all went down just rang completely hollow. It just seemed like, guy, you are making this up and it feels like we're the only people in the room that thinks that you're making it up. I'm not sure that whatever prophecy means in the New Testament, I'm not sure that it means that at the day of a child's dedication you should just go ahead and pronounce whatever you think this child is going to have, right? There's just no way to verify that and he was not going to be able to convince me scripturally that that is a norm in the church world.

That's a very minor form of stuff that happens every day. A person claiming to do something in the name of the Lord with supernatural ability and it rings hollow and there's no way to prove that it has any scriptural veracity. And you know what it did for me? In that moment I started to wonder, is any of this true? What else in this service should I not believe? See when people abuse the supernatural and the spiritual, it creates further scandal. It creates further unbelief.

So we've got all of these things stacking the deck against us to believe that a virgin birth could happen. Scientific process says no way. The abuse of the supernatural that we see on TV and in the headlines every day says, no, no, this is just somebody manipulating you because that's what supernatural and spiritual stuff is all about, manipulating people. All of that stacks the deck against us and yet here it is. He was born of a virgin and people witnessed it and they wrote about it and it is well attested and you can still find people today who can't accept the virgin birth of Jesus because they have to have a natural explanation. What you end up with is a Jesus who isn't special and isn't God and can't help you at all. That's what you end up with.

What expectations do you bring to this? We're 21st century people living in the western world. What expectations do you bring to a passage that screams the supernatural at us and tells us God has shown up and has done something that is not heard of? It is a miracle. Could it be true? Could it be that there's a God who's been up to something for people like us in our time and space? We're called here to surprise, to marvel, to have a sense of wonder and to take that inner cynic that we have groomed and developed and shaped and to stuff it down and to let the Word of God actually ring in our ears. It's a surprise.

How is it a good surprise? That's the thing we need to answer here. It's one thing to say that God came to earth and it looked like a scandal but it was a surprise. But how does it turn into a good surprise for us? That's because of the next flipped expectation.

From sin to salvation.

Let's talk about that. The angel told Joseph to go ahead and marry Mary because nothing untoward has happened. It's the work of God and then he gives more information. He tells Joseph, she will bear a son, you Joseph, call his name Jesus. To be clear on what's happening here, he should go ahead, go through with the wedding, don't divorce her and adopt her son, though he is not the father. Jesus does not have a biological, physical father. It's a virgin birth. But Joseph would need to adopt Jesus and give him his name. That's the right of a father in those days. In doing so, here's what would happen. Jesus would take on Joseph's lineage, which is a big deal.

Adoption is legally binding then and now. Adoption means you have the full rights of a son and it means that you are now identified with the family line. This is important because the Messiah had to come from the line of David. It's the reason why the angel addresses Joseph as Joseph, son of David. Name him Jesus. When you name him, you adopt him and your lineage becomes his lineage. There's an argument that Mary's lineage goes back to Joseph or to David too, but that is less clear than what's happening here in Matthew chapter one, where Joseph is to adopt Jesus and he gains the Messianic, Davidic family line through his adopted father.

But then he gives this indication of what's going to be special about this child, whereas we witnessed a weird pronouncement about a child. This is the pronouncement about Jesus. Call his name Jesus. He will save his people from their sins. You probably know this. The name Jesus is from the Hebrew name Jeshua, Joshua, and there's tons of little Hebrew children running around with the name Joshua, and it literally translates to Yahweh is salvation. And so the angel is saying, name him Jesus because Yahweh is salvation. He'll carry that name, but then he goes further. It's not just that Yahweh is salvation. This one is Yahweh who will bring salvation for his people, meaning he will do it. He will accomplish it. This gets to the heart of the mission of the Messiah, that the people of God have sinned. The nations have sinned. They can't know God. They can't be near him because he's holy. They can't go to heaven after they die. They're alienated. They're separated from their Creator and into a broken world of rebellion, sin, and the expectation that things will go from bad to worse. Jesus is Yahweh who came to save. It's literally in his name, but you see the other name. Two names here. Matthew says this entire event took place to fulfill Isaiah 7:14. *The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they'll call his name Immanuel, which means God with us.* Steve read that earlier. That prophecy had an immediate fulfillment in the time of Ahaz, but as is often the case in the Old Testament, prophecies usually have sort of an immediate fulfillment, something that's specific to that time and place, but because God is the ultimate author of the whole thing, sometimes there is this future greater ultimate fulfillment of that prophecy at a point later on. That's what we're looking

at in Isaiah 7:14, that there would be a virgin who has a child whose name would be God with us.

We assume that that is all good, great news. We only translate God with us in positive terms, and that's because of where we sit on this side of the Christmas story and of the cross and of the resurrection. Tell that to the Philistines who stole the Ark of the Covenant, the box that was the symbolic presence of the Lord among his people. They stole the Ark of the Covenant, and as soon as they got it into their camp, they broke out in a plague that threatened to wipe them out entirely, and that was just from the symbol of the presence of God with us. Say that God with us is good news for the armies that would surround Israel multiple times, and then it would say that God himself would come down and would confuse them and they would run their swords through each other, and Israel would come out victorious. God with us for them was death. How do we think that God with us is good news? It only makes sense if we run the beginning of Matthew all the way through to the end of Matthew and take a look at the ultimate focus of the entire gospel, which is the cross. It's the death of this child that helps us make sense out of both of his names. How will Yahweh save us through the death of the Lord Jesus? How will God be with us in its good news? Only because of the work of the Lord Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection?

At the cross, Jesus experiences God's justice on himself, and justice doesn't fall on us.

At the cross, we see justice satisfied and grace extended to sinful people.

In the cross, we see the child is born to die so that we who are born in death already can actually, united to him, have life, and it's been the plan all along.

The son of David, whose kingdom shall never end, if you think about the trajectory of the gospel here, goes all the way to his death on a cross where it seemed like his kingdom would never even get started. Right? That's what the disciples thought, well, guess we missed it. Guess we got it wrong. Look, just another dead human, because that's what happens in a broken, fallen world. People die. The kingdom would never get started, salvation was never going to happen, and God had finally, ultimately given up on them until the third day when Mary sees him, and Peter can't believe it, and all of their expectations were flipped completely on their heads, and the kingdom has come, and salvation has been accomplished, and God is actually with us.

The story began with a miracle, a virgin birth, and it ends with a greater miracle, the resurrection of the Son of God, overturning our final and ultimate enemy, forever.

It's significant that in verse 24, Joseph woke up, and it wasn't a dream. You know, we have dreams too. Most of the time, I wake up and I'm so, so happy that that was just a dream, and it is not real, because it was something crazy. This was not a dream without reality. This was something that was not in the ether, but had no bearing on what was true. He did what the angel said, he married Mary, to confirm the virgin birth, he did not get with her physically until after Jesus was born, and she gave birth in time and space, and Joseph called his name Jesus,

and adopted him as his son, and the rest is literally history. The stories are true, and there were witnesses, and they wrote it down, and over thousands of years it's been attested to, and to everyone who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, because they've actually been born of the Spirit, not just born of the flesh. His coming takes us from sin and death to salvation and life. To make it clear, only for those who are united to him by faith.

If you're here and you're not yet a Christian, you're wrestling with spiritual realities, you welcome you here, this is a place where you're free to do that, but this is good news only if you become one of his people, and that only happens by faith. He was the real deal, he didn't fail. If you go digging, trying to find Jesus out as a fraud, I beg you to try, go ahead, get after it, because what you will find at every dig is substance, more and more confirmation that this is actually true and it's real. There's salvation in no one else, no other name given under heaven by which we can be saved.

It will require a lot of change.

It will require that you change the way you think.

It will require change in your affections as well, you're going to have to believe what he says is true, you're going to have to actually cast yourself upon him and trust him.

It will affect your will, all of it, it's receiving him, it's resting in what he's done for you, it means you're going to have to lay down all of your resistance and stop trusting in your own resume, which is a natural human tendency We're always trying to throw our resume out toward other people, accept me, look at who I am, accept me, look at what I've done, and then we do that with God, accept me, look at what I've done, look at, I'm not as bad as this guy. All of that is just posturing in resume building and just absolute rot and worthlessness in the kingdom of God.

You're going to have to trust Jesus works completely and acknowledge that we're not as good as we thought we were, not as strong as we thought we were, not as wise, moral, consistent. We are broken people who live in a broken world, where death is coming for all and most people expect a godless existence where we scratch out whatever pleasure and fun we can get and then we die.

You understand that that is the assumption of almost everybody that you know, that's not part of the people of God. That get what you can, this life is it. If maybe there's some ethereal heaven, but there's no way to prove it and you might as well just get yours now. There's certainly no god who can save you and there's certainly no god who's going to evaluate you, you don't have to worry about that. That thinking is just evidence of the plague that's going on on our insides. It's evidence of sin, it's evidence of rebellion and it's the very thing that Jesus came to kill and to rescue us from its grasp.

Have your sins been forgiven by Jesus because you asked him to do that for you? Has he saved you? If you don't know, today's the day to talk about it. Today's the day to drag that out into the light and let's see where it is. We'd love to talk to you more if you're not there.

For all of us, this reversal, it's the reason for all optimism and hope and joy. Sin forgiven, God with us, that's what's yours if you belong to Jesus.

Where do you need some expectations flipped right now?

Where do you need, in light of what Jesus came to do, where do you need to see a reversal?

It could be that your assumption is, I'll never change, I'll always be the same. I will never stop doing these, whatever, bad things that I do, thinking these thoughts that I think, saying these things that I say, I'll never change. What sin is rearing its ugly head causing trouble? Where do you need to believe that the Lord Jesus came to destroy sin's penalty and its power? It's a good day to repent, to come to him and to not have hope because you finally have the willpower to fix yourself, but to believe that Jesus himself is Yahweh who is salvation. He does save his people from their sins. Bring it to him, talk to someone, try a new strategy by faith.

Maybe you're in a different place and it's not your sin that is the expectation that needs to be flipped, but you just feel kind of beaten up by the world, the culture, the rapid rate of change, the destruction of Western civilization, all the things that the Internet and the people around us are screaming at us. Have fear, be afraid, this is terrible, everything is going to fall apart, AI is going to destroy you, right? That's the world we live in. Do we realize that whatever change comes?

This story begins with, his name is Emmanuel, God with us, and at the very end in chapter 28, it's the Lord Jesus who leaves us with these words, *I will never leave you or forsake you*, even if the West falls, even if AI takes over, even if you lose it all, even if everyone you know and love loses everything, even if the world completely comes untethered at the seams, he says *I will never leave you or forsake you*. It doesn't always feel like the expectations are flipped, but scandal, sorrow, betrayal, and evil won't win, because the surprise is that God has showed up, and he has shown up to make sure that we do not end in sin and death, we end in salvation and life and in new heavens and in new earth. So take all of the expectations of the fallen world and in your own sin and the culture of death, and go ahead and in your mind, in your heart, go ahead and flip them, because the Lord Jesus came to make all things new. Let's pray together.

*Lord, you've given us reason for rejoicing, so help us rejoice. Help us Lord to drag out our sin into the light and to confess it and to trust that Christ has died and risen to forgive us and to make us new creatures, and that's who we are. Help us oh Lord to not be squelched in our own cynicism about the supernatural, but would you help us to believe Lord you, you are who you say you are, and you've done what you've said you've done. Help us Father, meet us in all of our unbelief, and help us to rest and trust in the person of our Lord Jesus. We ask in his name, Amen.*