

“Believe that God is with us” Matthew 1:18-25 (12/21/25)

Have you ever experienced being trusted by someone?

Have you ever experienced someone believing in you unconditionally?

When trust is formed in a relationship, that relationship becomes deeper and more meaningful than an ordinary one. Trust strengthens a relationship and makes it truly significant.

You may have heard this phrase many times: “Sola Fide.”

It is one of the three slogans Martin Luther proclaimed during the Reformation. Luther used this phrase to challenge the Catholic Church of his time, declaring that people are justified not by works, but by faith. Martin Luther was a theologian and a monk who taught Scripture in the early sixteenth century.

In the early 1500s, the Roman Catholic Church began selling indulgences to raise funds for the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica. An indulgence was, simply put, a certificate sold by the church that was believed to reduce or remove the punishment resulting from sin. Some preachers even proclaimed that the moment a coin dropped into the offering box, a soul would jump out of purgatory.

There was a reason such practices were possible at that time. In the early sixteenth century, the Bible was written only in Latin. Latin was considered a sacred language, and translating the Bible into other languages was forbidden. The problem was that Latin was not a common spoken language. It was used only in the church, in theology, or in official documents. Ordinary people could not understand it at all. Historical records tell us that even many clergy could not truly read Latin, knowing only a few memorized phrases they had learned in seminary.

Worship services and Mass were conducted entirely in Latin. As a result, people attended worship without understanding anything that was being said.

Christians would stand through the service, receive communion, and go home. Even though they did not understand the content, people believed that attending Mass and receiving communion would bring them grace, protect them from judgment after death, and keep their souls safe. Records also show that many Christians at the time carried totems or charms to protect themselves from evil spirits. Their religious life was not driven by love for God, but by fear and a legalistic understanding of faith.

In such a situation, when the church began selling indulgences, people believed it was the right thing to do in order to save their souls and receive blessings. In the midst of this confusion, Martin Luther cried out *Sola Fide*—by faith alone, *Sola Gratia*—by grace alone, and *Sola Scriptura*—by Scripture alone. Through this movement, the Protestant church was born. That is why the Protestant church today can be described as a church built upon faith.

Faith is an essential element of our Christian life. Our entire spiritual journey is made possible through faith. John Wesley also taught the Methodists, saying, “Justified by faith” and “Sanctified by faith.” Even sanctification, which seems to be achieved through our actions, is accomplished through faith. Today, the Bible has been translated into many languages, allowing us to read and understand it. And when we carefully read Scripture, we see that many biblical authors proclaim that salvation comes through faith. God has always considered faith central to God’s relationship with us.

Today’s Scripture passage is the familiar story of Jesus’ birth from the Gospel of Matthew. Through this story, we see that Jesus’ birth was grounded in the faith of two people. The first is Mary. Mary heard from the angel that she would conceive and give birth to the Messiah. She receives this message in faith, offers praise and thanksgiving to God, and gives birth to Jesus. If Mary had dismissed the angel’s

message as a dream or reacted with fear or confusion about her pregnancy, the birth of Jesus might not have taken place in the way we know it.

The second faith, which is directly mentioned in today's passage, is the faith of Joseph. As mentioned earlier, Matthew wrote his Gospel to proclaim to Jewish readers that Jesus is the Christ. That is why the genealogy of Jesus appears at the very beginning. Through it, Jewish readers would have recognized that Joseph belonged to the lineage of their ancestors of faith—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David. Matthew describes Joseph by saying, “Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law.” To Jewish readers, this meant that Joseph was not only from a faithful lineage, but also someone who took the law seriously.

Even after hearing the angel's message in a dream, accepting Mary was not an easy decision for someone who was deeply faithful to the law. Yet Joseph, when he woke up, immediately obeyed the word he had received in faith. Matthew records it this way: “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.” If either Mary or Joseph had failed to respond in faith, the birth of Jesus might not have unfolded as it did.

Of course, God is almighty. Even if Mary and Joseph had not responded in faith, God could have changed their hearts or chosen another way to bring Jesus into the world. But what we learn from the Gospel is this: God chose to carry out the coming of the Messiah in partnership with human faith.

So why does God place such importance on faith in forming a relationship with us?

In the Old Testament, the relationship between God and humanity begins with covenant—a form of contract. The two most well-known covenants are God's covenant with Abraham and God's covenant with David. In simple terms, both are

promises in which God commits to blessing humanity. But we must ask ourselves: if a relationship is only contractual, can it truly be a relationship of shared hearts?

Scripture describes the relationship between God and humanity as that of master and servant, parent and child, bridegroom and bride. These relationships cannot be fully explained by contracts alone. While a servant and master relationship may begin with a contract, Jesus' parables show us that a good and faithful servant goes beyond obligation, serving out of devotion. In a parent-child relationship, if parents only provide for children based on strict terms, and children only obey based on conditions, can that truly be called a family? The same is true of marriage. A marriage that is nothing more than fulfilling contractual obligations can hardly be called a loving relationship.

The Pharisees and Sadducees in Jesus' time misunderstood this. They believed that if they obeyed the law well enough, they would receive blessings like Abraham or David. But Abraham was the father of faith, and David was a man after God's own heart. God desires a relationship with us that goes beyond contracts—a relationship sustained by trust and faith.

For the past year, I have often spoken about "God is with us." This truth also requires faith. We must know by faith that God is with us. If we understand God's presence in a legalistic way, it changes depending on our circumstances. When things go well, we may believe God is with us; when things go poorly, we may doubt it. If we treat God's presence like a formula, a charm, or a way to secure good outcomes and avoid hardship, then we are approaching it as law, not faith.

But when we truly believe that God is with us, that truth takes root in us through faith. Our relationship with God becomes a relationship of trust. A relationship of faith means sharing everything—our joy, our blessings, our struggles,

our sorrow, and our suffering—with God. Entrusting our whole lives to God is what it means to believe that God is with us.

Faith is not merely agreeing with a doctrine in our minds. Faith is entering into a relationship with God. It is trusting God and placing our lives in God's hands. Just as Mary believed God's word in an incomprehensible situation, and Joseph trusted God's will more than the law, God is still waiting for that kind of faithful response from us today.

God does not treat us as contractual partners. God calls us children and companions. God does not ask us to prove ourselves through our works, but invites us to trust God and walk together with God.

This is the meaning of Christmas. The coming of Jesus Christ into the world reveals how much God trusted humanity, and at the same time invites humanity to trust God. God worked through the faith of Mary and Joseph, and God continues to work through our faith today.

Therefore, in this season of Christmas, I invite you to once again believe, by faith, that God is with us. No matter our circumstances, no matter how we feel, God is still with us. When we hold on to that truth by faith, our faith becomes not law but relationship, not obligation but companionship.

May we continue to live by faith with the God of Immanuel, who is with us always. In the name of our Lord, Amen.