



Matthew 1:18-21
 The New Normal
 Undone By God

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 September 27th, 2020

This morning we continue our series on the “New Normal.” And today we’re looking at: how do we respond when God brings a new normal into our life? And to get us thinking about this, I was trying to come up with a time when a “new normal” came into my life, or came into a significant part of the world, or even the whole world, that seemed to be attributable to God - which, admittedly knowing if something is “from God” is not always easy. I’m sure there have been significant events that ushered in a “new normal” for at least a while, and people interpreted it as being “from God” and communicating some kind of message...and I really was trying to remember when such a thing happened. But I was struggling to come up with anything. My mind was drawing a blank. Anyone have any suggestions?

Coronavirus! Of course! Not that this is the first time people have said such a thing. Hurricanes, earthquakes, and more have often been seen by some people as a sign that ushers in a new normal, through which God is trying to communicate something.

Whether coronavirus is “from God” and “a message/sign” from God is probably not really answerable at this time - though it’s clear in the gospels that Jesus is in the business of *healing* people, not making them sick, so I have a hard time believing this is “from God.” **But some people seem quite convinced that it is, and they’re equally as certain about the message - though people disagree on what the message might be.** So let’s play along for this morning and consider this. Some have said that it’s a judgment from God on certain people whose lifestyles aren't godly. In other words: it’s a judgment on sin, and on certain sins in particular - usually not the sins that those people have in their own lives who *make* these proclamations. It’s always someone else’s sin.

Some have said it’s a sign of the end of the times, that Jesus is coming soon, and this is the message God is sending in this virus. This one is interesting because Jesus himself said he didn’t know when the end of the times was coming, and that it would be like a thief in the night.

And then there are other Christians who have taken the attitude of, “Well, if I die, I go to heaven...just keep the golf courses and the movie theaters open in the meantime, please.” **Maybe they even quote the Apostle Paul in Philippians 1:21, “To live is Christ and to die is gain.”** While their confidence in God’s grace and forgiveness and their own eternal resting place is wonderful, this attitude puts others in danger - which isn’t really “loving your neighbor as yourself.” And, they are also forgetting the very continuation of Paul’s writing there in Philippians, which says: **“...but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know I will remain” (Philippians 1:24b, 25).**

Others respond with incredible evangelistic zeal and proclaim that this is the great hour of people turning to God. That there’s going to be a revival and all these people who have previously rejected God their entire lives are now going to repent of their sin (which, depending on the sin, maybe is causing the pandemic to begin with)...so because God has sent the virus all these people are *now* finally going to become Jesus followers.

If the virus is sent by God (And as I said, that’s a questionable premise): **Are these the best Christian responses to God’s activity in the world that we have?** Are these responses helpful in shining the light of Christ? Do they really attract people to Jesus and build people up in their faith? Are they Biblical? That “Biblical” question” is probably the first one we should be asking ourselves. And it’s not to say that there’s zero truth in any of them or that we don’t see *some* Biblical examples that line up with some of these responses. It’s not to say revival is bad or evangelism is bad or we shouldn’t do it, for example. We absolutely should and whether I use that word “evangelism” or not, it’s one of the most common emphases in my sermons. I’m not saying that sin shouldn’t be called out, acknowledged, and confessed and repented of. That’s a central piece of the gospel and of acknowledging Jesus as Lord.

But in these proclamations presume God has sent it and what he’s saying through it, there tends to be a certain self-righteousness, and arrogance, and attitude of “I’m so certain of this” that just doesn’t square up with Scripture. For instance, there are times when God pronounces judgment on a nation,

such as Israel, for its sin. But then there's also the 400+ years they were in Egypt, poorly treated, and over time brought in to slave labor by the Egyptians...but it's never said that was because of their sin or the sin of their ancestors. So how can a person be so certain that the pandemic is like one of those (caused by sin) and not the other?

So, as Francis Shaeffer said in the title of his famous book, "How Should We Then Live?" What is our response? Let's turn to Matthew 1 for God's word to us today for one example that is instructive.

Matthew 1:18-21 Here

It's three months until Christmas. Maybe by reading a passage we normally would read near the end of the year at Christmas time, 2020 will somehow end sooner? It can't come fast enough, right?

But what we see here is that Joseph and Mary give us a good model to follow. **They had a significant "new normal" enter into their lives.** And it comes to them from the Lord. Perhaps our response might be, "Yeah, but a pregnancy is a *good* thing from God, it's something that's desired so it's not really comparable to new normals that *aren't* desired." But that's forgetting that getting pregnant was the last thing they wanted right then.

In fact, because they weren't actually yet married, they weren't engaging in sexual relations. I know for some people in today's culture — especially outside of the church, but surprisingly, even for some inside of it — it's hard to imagine that a man and woman could be in a relationship to the point of being all but married...and not engage in sex, or not living together. But in their culture (because of their faith) that was the norm and the expectation. You waited.

So: This pregnancy was a new normal that they were not expecting.

Perhaps you've seen the famous book on preparing to welcome a baby into the world titled, "What to Expect When You're Expecting"? Well, Mary and Joseph could have written, "What to Expect and You're Expecting...and You Weren't Expecting It!"

I want you to imagine that you're Joseph and Mary for a moment. You're a young couple, planning your wedding, making plans and taking steps to establish yourselves in life on your own...and you really want to do everything in a way that honors God and your families. Everything is trending in the right direction - not that there aren't some challenges along the way, but they're all normal and expected and you can manage them.

And then God completely interrupts your life in a way that potentially wrecks the wedding, as well as the plans and steps to get established, it feels like it does anything but honor God, and it feels like it doesn't honor either of your families, either. **How should you respond to THAT?**

Joseph initially doesn't see God's hand in it and presumes infidelity by Mary. It's not like pregnancies through the Holy Spirit are common. So he sought to call off the engagement - "divorce" is the word that's used ("husband" too) simply because an engagement was that binding in their culture. But because he does care for her, he didn't want to do it in a way that brought embarrassment to her. So he was going to do it quietly. But then, God moved in an unusual way in Joseph's life. He spoke to Joseph in a dream to let him know that the pregnancy was in fact, an act of God through the Holy Spirit.

So now they know that this "new normal" is brought on them by God. Again: How should they respond to that? Well, we get their response just a couple verses later: **When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus (Luke 1:24-25).** They (Mary was certainly a part of this even if these two verses focus on Joseph) did everything that God asked them to from that point forward. Now, does that mean there weren't questions, or doubts or times where they didn't live into this calling *exactly* right? Probably not. We aren't given every detail of their lives and their response... and there probably were some questions and doubts and so forth along the way. But they simply moved forward in life in light of what God was doing.

How could they do that? **By trusting that as hard as this new normal was, God was going to do something good through it.** They trusted that God would do something good through Jesus. They trusted God even when things

were difficult. This trust allowed them to stay completely focused on what God was doing in their lives, which was all about Jesus. So even before Jesus is born, we see that all of their - and by extension, our - experiences, including those that God brings into our life that might be challenging or even painful, need to be viewed through the lens of Jesus Christ. That, ultimately, is where our trust is focused.

I mentioned a couple Sundays ago that I had recently purchased a book by the New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, titled, “God and the Pandemic.”¹ By the way, N.T. Wright’s initials stand for “Nicholas Thomas” - I finally looked that up out of curiosity. And although I haven’t finished the book yet, I have already come across a handful of things that help us understand how to respond when God brings a new normal into our lives.

And one thing he writes is this: **“The minute we find ourselves looking at the world around us and jumping to conclusions about God and what he might be doing, *but without looking carefully at Jesus*, [emphasis in the original quote] we are in serious danger of forcing through an “interpretation” which might look attractive — it might seem quite ‘spiritual’ and awe-inspiring — but which actually screens Jesus out of the picture” (N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, p. 19-20).**

Joseph and Mary did anything *but* screen Jesus out of the picture. In fact, what God was doing was very much centered on Jesus: they even give Jesus his name as Joseph was told in the dream! Interestingly, much as N.T. Wright says in this quote, Joseph (in particular) initially *did* jump to a conclusion. Not about what God was doing, but what Mary was doing - and it was an assumption about sin. Fortunately, Joseph literally slept on it for a night, or maybe it was even a few nights, didn’t make a rush to a conclusion, and God got through to him. Because of that, they started looking at what God was doing, and they looked at it through the “lens” of Jesus. They kept Jesus at the center of their lives.

There’s more we can look at, too. For instance: **Later in Jesus’ ministry he was asked on different occasions what kind of sign he would give of**

¹ This book influences some of the rest of the sermon, which should be noted.

God's activity in the world. And when he answers, He points to himself as they only sign that's needed. For instance, in Matthew 12 when Jesus is asked about signs of God's activity in the world, he speaks of his three days "in the belly of the earth" just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days. In other words, Jesus all the sign that they need - particularly his death and resurrection. In John 6 some people again ask Jesus what sign he will give, and again Jesus points to himself - it's where we get his famous statement, "I am the bread of life."

When Jesus does bring up wars and famines and earthquakes and other significant world events - the kinds of "signs" that people tend to look for - his message is not "Look around the world and see who's sin has caused this." His message is "Don't be alarmed" such as he says in Matthew 24:6, and then a few verses later he says "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." **No proclamations about judgment, blaming certain sins, no advice to start predicting the end of the world. He keeps the focus on the "gospel of the kingdom."** ...The "good news" of Jesus' Kingdom.

One final example is the death of Jesus' friend Lazarus. His sisters, Mary and Martha, are upset at Jesus that Jesus didn't do anything to save Lazarus and save them from this new normal. Jesus even knew a few days before Lazarus' death that he was gravely ill, but he didn't come to heal him, and he didn't heal him from afar. In a nutshell, they attribute his death to Jesus. Jesus doesn't then turn the tables and suggest that God did this because of Lazarus' sin, or because of the sins of Mary and Martha or anyone else. Jesus' first reaction is...do you remember? To weep. It shows his own heartache, but also his compassion for Mary and Martha. There's no judgment or blame or grand proclamations. He weeps with them; he's with them in their grief and in their "new normal."

And then he simply calls Lazarus out of the tomb. In other words, the only proclamation he makes is one that demonstrates the Kingdom of God in the midst of the pain of their new normal.

Jesus responds to "new normals" in people's lives and in his own life, in this gracious, compassionate, "announcing of the Kingdom of God" way all the

time. **This is how we ought to respond, and this is the one in whom we trust when our own “new normal” arrives.** God *may* be bringing us through a difficult time. There *may* be a message he’s communicating. There may be a sign of some kind. But let’s not let it drive us to judgments or rash proclamations that leave Jesus out. Jesus died for the sins of the world, because of his incredible love, compassion, and commitment. Let’s keep that in mind so that even when people feel like their lives are coming undone because of something God is doing, we can be a gracious and compassionate presence in their lives, and help them see Jesus in the midst of it. That’s how Jesus responded, and we don’t want to screen him out of our own response as well.

Mary and Joseph are incredible examples of exactly that. They stayed focused on Jesus and set the example for us. And because of that, the Good News that Jesus saves has gone out for the last 2,000 years. Let’s pray... Amen.