Sermon Series: The Wonder of Christmas
Sermon Title: Christmas Hope

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

Introduction: Having just finished a series on the SECOND coming of our Lord Jesus Christ called **Things to Come**, today we're beginning a four-week preaching series called ***The Wonder of Christmas*** where we'll be taking a look at Jesus' FIRST advent into our world more than two thousand years ago in the tiny village of Bethlehem. It seems to me that the word "**wonder**" is a very appropriate word to describe the birth of Jesus. ***One online dictionary defines it as the feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by something beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or inexplicable***. When you read the Christmas story in **Matthew** and **Luke**, you quickly discover that the birth of the Savior of the world was truly a WONDER for two reasons: (**1**) with the exception of a few wise men from the east, Elizabeth and Zachariah, and Mary and Joseph, the world did not anticipate it. It was a total SURPRISE. Sadly, they missed this real-life human drama that would result in the incarnation of the Son of God and (**2**) according to the angel of the Lord, the whole point of Jesus' first advent was to save His people from their sins. God was doing something BEAUTIFUL for mankind by sending His Son into the world. IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL SURPRISE! That's the definition of a wonder. ***Why did so many miss it?*** It may well be that most had lost hope. They were too wrapped up in just trying to make it through the hardships of each day and onto the next to think about anything else, EVEN THE FULFILLMENT OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHEY. **The world was not a happy place for the majority of people when Christ was born and there was little reason for them to think things were going to improve**.

Not much has changed in the world, by the way. Today, the pursuit of happiness isn't working out for a lot of people either. Listen to this: **The General Social Survey** asks its participants to rate their happiness levels. It turns out, that between 1990 and 2018 the share of Americans who put themselves in **the lowest happiness category increased by more than 50 percent**. This survey, conducted by the **Gallup poll, was done again in 2022**, with 147,000 adults in 142 countries participating. They were asked numerous questions about their emotional lives. Their level of angst related to stress, sadness, anger, worry, and physical pain was a mere percentage point from the record high in 2021 when most of the world was suffering through the COVID-19 pandemic. Gallup asked people to rate their lives on a scale from **zero to 10**, with zero meaning **you're living your worst possible life** and 10 meaning **you're living your best**. In 2005, only **1.6 percent** of people worldwide rated their life as a zero. By 2022, the share of people reporting the worst possible lives had **more than quadrupled**. The irony, of course, is that in a world that is being overrun with sadness and despair, the Christian celebration of Christmas should provide A SOURCE OF HOPE that can lift people out of their doom and gloom to a much better place. But this requires that **they turn their attention to the Christ-child and His purpose in coming into the world as THE HOPE OF THE NATIONS** (**Matthew 12:21 – In His name, the nations will put their hope**).

Hope is an amazing virtue. ***It is as essential to life as food, shelter, and clothing. Without hope, we roll over, give up, and die slowly over time***. Because it's that important to us, and because it is central to our celebration of Christmas, I would like to invite you to join me as we take some time this morning to learn some things about the hope that came into the world at the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's start with this.

HOPE IS MORE THAN WISHFUL THINKING. To hope is to look forward to something. The Greek term for "**hope**" (elpidzo) means a "***favorable and confident expectation***." One writer calls it ***the happy anticipation of good***. The word is closely associated with another word in the New Testament, "**trust**," so we find verses that disclose this relationship between the two like **Hebrews 11:1**: "**Faith is being sure of what we hope for**." In fact, in other places it's even translated as "**trust**" (**2 Corinthians 13:6 (NIV) -- And I trust (elpidzo) that you will discover that we have not failed the test.** Hope has a way of enabling us to endure present hardships because we look to the future with CONFIDENCE. ***One thing hope is not, however, is a mere pipe dream***. You know, **a delusional fantasy achieved while in a mind-altered state that has virtually no chance of happening**. Pipe dreams are no source of hope. I'm thinking about a lady who called her husband while he was golfing at the local club. A group of men was standing around in the locker room when a cell

phone on the bench started to ring, and a man picked it up, put it on speakerphone, and said "**Hello**?". The woman on the other end said "**Honey, it's me. Are you still at the golf club**?" "**Yeah, what's going on**?" "**I'm out shopping and found this great new leather coat, and it's only $500, can I get it**?" "**Sure, if you like it. Go for it**." "**Thank you! By the way, I was also at the dealership earlier and saw the new Mercedes models, and there is one that's absolutely gorgeous, and I want it**!" "**How much is it**?" "**About $180,000…**" "**Alright, but for that price I want all the extra options included**." "**Great! One other thing. The house we looked at last year is back on the market, and the price as dropped to $1,500,000. What do you think**?" "**That's a great price. Go ahead and close the deal.**" "**No kidding? Okay! I love you, see you later**!" "**Love you too**." The rest of the men in the club stared at him wide-eyed. As he hung up the phone the man looked at them and asked, "**Can someone tell Bob I found his cell phone**?" The Bible says, "**Hope deferred makes the heart sick (Proverbs 13:12)**." Hope for the believer is never like that. Why? **Because it is based not on the word of a man, but on the character and promises of God**. It is, therefore, as reliable as God Himself. No wonder the Psalmist could say, "**You are my refuge and my shield. I have put my hope in your Word** (**Psalm 119:114**). That's the kind of hope that gets us through life. It is truly a hope that does not disappoint (**See Romans 5:5**). (**Review: Hope is more than wishful thinking.**)

HOPE IS ESSENTIAL DURING OUR DARKEST MOMENTS. This isn't to say that hope is unnecessary during the good times of life. We always long for a more favorable future. ***But it's in the gloomy moments when we're most susceptible to defeatist thoughts and attitudes, that hope becomes vitally important***. These are exactly the kind of circumstances that Israel was in when Christ was born in a manger in Bethlehem. ***On one hand,*** they had an insecure king named **Herod the Great** who feared the loss of his reign and so brought great grief to his subjects. Do you remember what he did when he heard there was one born king of the Jews? He gave orders to have all the male children two years old and younger in Bethlehem and its vicinity to be put to death. **Perhaps his insecurity was fueled by passages like Genesis 49:10 -- The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until He comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is His; and Jeremiah 23:5-6 – "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness. CERTAINLY, THESE PASSAGES DID NOT DESCRIBE HEROD!** ***Then there was also the fact that they had a Roman emperor*** (Caesar Augustus) ***to whom they were forced to submit and pay tribute***. In the early years of the first

century, the Jews desperately needed something good to happen. Because they were truly in need of an infusion of hope, at exactly the right time in human history (**Galatians 4:4 – When the fullness of time had come**), God sent His Son. How important is hope when the chips are down? It's essential! **Listen to these words from G. K. Chesterton. "*Hope means hoping when things are hopeless, or it is no virtue at all...As long as matters are really hopeful, hope is mere flattery or platitude; it is only when everything is hopeless that hope begins to be a strength*."** The world of the Jews two thousand years ago was devoid of hope and that's when God showed up! (**Review: Hope is more than wishful thinking; it is essential during our darkest moments.**)

HOPE IS FOUND IN THE BABY IN THE MANGER. In our text for this morning from **Matthew 1** we find the disciple of our Lord doing his best to convince his readers that Jesus is ***the long-awaited source of hope***. This claim is seen in virtually every detail related to His first coming.

- **IN HIS MIRACULOUS BIRTH** (**Matthew 1:18-19 -- 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 just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly).** The miracle, of course, was not that Mary had a baby (*billions of women have done that*), but that ***the baby she delivered did not have a human father***. Matthew tells us that she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. It's his way of saying that ***Jesus' birth was a unique blending of the divine and the human so that He was and is fully human and fully God***. That's why Matthew starts with Jesus' human genealogy consisting of 17 verses and then in no uncertain terms informs us that He is also from God. This idea of a virgin birth should not have surprised those Jews familiar with the Old Testament. ***GOD FORETOLD IT*** (**Genesis 3:15 -- Proto-Evangelium -- I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel")** and ***JEREMIAH PROPHESIED OF IT*** (**Jeremiah 31:22 - For the Lord has created a new thing on the earth: a woman encircles a man). That phrase "a woman encircles a man" was taken by the early churches fathers to refer to the virgin birth because it focuses on the activity of God under the new covenant**). Never before or since has anyone entered into our world in this way. The fact that Jesus did this was meant to call special attention to Him and to announce that He was the One upon whom the hopes of Israel rested. (**Review: Hope is found in the baby in the manger – through His miraculous birth.**)

- **IN HIS MESSIANIC ROLE** (**Matthew 1:20-21 -- 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"**). Two clues in these verses lead us to the conclusion that Jesus is the promised Messiah. **(1) JOSEPH – SON OF DAVID** – This tells us that Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, was of the royal line of David. This meant that Jesus was too. Although he was not the actual son of Joseph, Jesus was his legal son. This is vital to our understanding of Christ because of the promise made by God hundreds of years before to David (**2 Samuel 7:12-13 -- When your days** (referring to King David) **are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever**). ***No Jew could claim to be the Messiah*** (*which Jesus certainly did*—**John 4:25-26 -- The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he"**) ***unless he was of the line of David***. **(2) FOR HE SHALL SAVE HIS PEOPLE** -- The name Jesus is taken from the Hebrew name Joshua or Jeshua. It means "***The Lord will save***." Indeed, Jesus had come to rescue His people, not from the tyranny of Roman rule, but from the power of sin, i.e., death and slavery (**See Romans 6:17, 23**). (**REVIEW: Hope is found in the baby in the manger – through His miraculous birth and His messianic role.**)
- **IN HIS DIVINE TITLE** (**Matthew 1:22-23 -- 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**). Matthew concludes this section on the birth of Christ by stating that everything happened in direct fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. At least eight times in His gospel Matthew makes this claim. In **verse 22**, he quotes **Isaiah 7:14** which says, **"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."** ***This is not meant to be a name*** (He was already given one—Jesus), ***but a title that would provide even greater insight into His identity***. He is God with us, something that Jesus never denied (**John 20:26-29 -- Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and**

yet have believed”). That a virgin would be with child is MIRACULOUS; that the child she bore was the Messiah of God is INCREDIBLE; but how about the fact that He was called “Immanuel?” Now that’s AWESOME! All of this Matthew shares with us for a very specific reason. He wants our hope to be secure in Christ. How likely is it that Jesus was and is the Son of God and the Messiah of God? **Josh McDowell**, a Christian apologist, states that the odds of one person fulfilling even eight prophecies given by several people over many years is 1 out of 10^{17} (a one followed by 17 zeros). This is equivalent to covering the entire state of Texas with silver dollars two feet deep, marking one of them with an X, mixing them all up, and having a blindfolded person select the marked one at random the very first time.

Conclusion: So, what did we say today? ***Hope is more than wishful thinking; It is essential during our darkest moments: and hope is realized in the baby born in the manger -- with His miraculous birth, His messianic role, and His divine title.*** All of this proves that He’s worthy of our confidence and trust. If I might be so bold as to ask, in what are you placing your hope today? Be careful and choose wisely. So much is resting on your choice. You may have heard of **George Bernard Shaw**, renowned as a free thinker and liberal philosopher. In his last writings, we read, "***The science to which I pinned my faith is bankrupt. Its counsels, which should have established the millennium, led, instead, directly to the suicide of Europe. I believed them once. In their name, I helped to destroy the faith of millions of worshippers in the temples of a thousand creeds. And now they look at me and witness the great tragedy of an atheist who has lost his faith***." There is only one source of hope…***the baby born of a virgin who came to save His people from their sins. The One who goes by the name “Immanuel***.” Do you know this source of hope?