

Son of David, Son of God
A Sermon on Matthew 1:18-25
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 22, 2019

Introduction

On the fourth Sunday of Advent, our attention turns toward the birth of Jesus. Today we will look at the *other* Christmas story, the one from Matthew.

Clear your head of Luke's Christmas story. It was written 30 to 40 years after Matthew's story. There are no shepherds and mangers in Matthew's story. There are no angels in the night sky, proclaiming, "Peace on Earth. Goodwill to men." Forget about the Magnificat. That is in Luke. Mary has no magnificent speeches in Matthew. Our attention is turned instead toward Joseph.

Do you know the first line of Matthew's gospel? "A record of [the] genesis of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham." Chapter 1 of Matthew's gospel focuses on the question, Who is Jesus? That is the same question that John the Baptist asked last week. It is an appropriate question for Advent.

Matthew then gives us a genealogy of Jesus, 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 generations from David to the exile in Babylon, and 14 generations from exile to Jesus. Today Matthew will describe for us how Jesus is the moment in history that we have been waiting for.

First Move: God Intervenes in the Life of a Righteous Man

Jesus is the beginning of a new creation. Matthew again uses the word *genesis* to describe the birth of Jesus: "Now the genesis of Jesus Christ was in this manner."

Matthew tells us how God intervened in the lives of two seemingly ordinary people: Matthew a carpenter, and Mary a young peasant girl.

Mary is betrothed to Joseph. Betrothal is an ancient custom that we don't practice anymore. Most of the marriages in those days were arranged by the parents. Betrothal is a marriage contract that the parents of the couple enter into. The betrothed woman continues to live with her parents and does not move in with her husband until the wedding ceremony, usually about a year later. Betrothal gives the man legal rights over the woman. During the interim, the woman is considered the wife of the man. She can become a widow or commit adultery. A betrothal can be dissolved only with a certificate of divorce.

The text says “after she was betrothed to Joseph,” but “before they came together.” Mary has not yet moved into Joseph’s home. The text calls Joseph “her husband.”

Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant. There is no Greek word for pregnant in the New Testament. The Hebrew expression is “having in womb.”

Joseph does not know that the Holy Spirit is responsible for the child. He can only assume that Mary has been unfaithful to him.

Deuteronomy 22:23-25 sets forth the Jewish law on adultery. It says that if a virgin is engaged to be married and she lies with a man in town, both the virgin and the man shall be stoned. The idea is that people in town would have heard her cry for help if she was virtuous and tried to resist.

The first thing that Matthew tells us about Joseph’s character is that he is righteous. That is the highest compliment Matthew can give a person. Righteous means you are in right relationship with God. You are obedient to God’s will. Jews believe that God’s will is revealed in the Torah, the law.

Joseph complies with the spirit of the law instead of the letter of the law. He will obey the law by divorcing Mary, but he will not bring charges against her and publicly humiliate her.

This is a merciful response. The gospel of Matthew twice quotes Hosea 6:6: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”

Anger comes more easily to the rest of us than mercy. Many of us lash out in anger when someone close to us hurts us. We believe that our lover is rejecting us by being intimate with someone else. It makes us feel small.

Joseph is secure. His self-esteem is not threatened by the news that Mary is pregnant.

No matter how much he may love Mary, it is his religious obligation to end the marriage contract. Joseph does not want to punish Mary, but he does not condone what she did. He decides to dismiss her quietly. He does not want to shame her by seeking a public trial for adultery.

Joseph apparently is still considering what to do. He is “reflecting on these things,” when he has a dream.

The receiver of dreams was considered to be an especially spiritual or powerful person. People believed that God communicated with people through their dreams. The most prominent person to have dreams in the Old Testament is another Joseph, the one with the multi-colored coat.

An angel appears in the dream to Matthew's Joseph. The angel addresses him as "Joseph, son of David." Joseph is important to God's plans. Jesus will not be recognized as a son of David unless Joseph acknowledges Jesus as his son.

The angel tells Joseph to be not afraid to take Mary into his home. You will not be violating God's will. The angel reveals to Joseph that "what has been begotten in her is from [the] holy spirit."

Begotten is not a word we use much today either, except when we hear it in church. It means to father someone. You are borne by the mother and begotten by the father.

Jesus is begotten from the holy spirit. We should not think of this as sexual union between Mary and the Holy Spirit. The spirit is feminine in Hebrew and neuter in Greek. Jesus is not a hybrid of man and God but a product of God's creative activity through the Holy Spirit. Matthew has an Old Testament conception of the Holy Spirit as a vehicle of divine power. The spirit simply creates baby Jesus and rests the baby in Mary's womb.

We have a hard time visualizing that. We can't get the Nicene Creed out of our heads: "Very God of very God, begotten not made." People who recite the creed in church every Sunday have an even harder time. Emphasizing the role of the spirit brings this story out of the realm of Greek mythology and into the history of Israel. The spirit is the catalyst of the new throughout Israel's history. God is making a radically new beginning with Jesus. This is the story of the genesis of Jesus.

Son of God and Son of David are interlocking and harmonious for Matthew. Son of God came into Hebrew thought through being a son of David. God promised David that he would raise up a son of David and establish his throne forever. Sonship is adopted. The king is made God's son at coronation. Psalm 2:7 speaks of the king as God's son at coronation: "You are my son; today I have begotten you." Matthew adds something new by taking sonship back to conception in the womb.

Second Move: Call Him Jesus and Emmanuel

Matthew has two more titles for Jesus: the name Jesus and the name Emmanuel.

The angel tells Joseph, "You will call the name of him Jesus." That expression is a Semitism. Jesus was a common name in the first century. It is Semitic for Yahweh saves or Yahweh helps. Jesus will save the people from their sins. Matthew would have understood the people to mean the people of Israel.

Jesus will deliver the people from their own sins. The text is silent about liberating the people from Roman occupation and Roman oppression.

We have reduced saving people from their sins to Jesus' death on the cross, but Matthew describes how Jesus saved the people from their sins in a variety of ways. The cross would have been one way for Matthew, but there are others as well.

Delivering the people from their sins removes the wall that separates God from humans. Jesus' miracles of healing sickness and disease would be seen as saving the people from their sins. Sickness and diseases was thought by many to be a result of sin. Jesus rejects that understanding of sin, heals the people and brings them back into community.

Jesus' has five long speeches in Matthew; he tells the people how to attain higher righteousness. This is another way of removing the wall that separates God from humans.

Matthew mentions naming the child three times. The name itself is important and so is the act of naming the child. By naming Jesus, Joseph will adopt Jesus into the line of David.

Jesus is an outsider who is grafted into the house of Israel, much as the Gentiles who followed Christ were outsiders to the house of Israel in Matthew's day. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus includes four scandalous women: Tamar, who disguised herself and deceived her father-in-law into having sex with her, Rahab, the prostitute who protected the spies in Jericho, Ruth, who went to lie at the feet of Boaz, and Bathsheba, who committed adultery with David. Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba were Gentiles.

Emmanuel is another title for Jesus. Matthew understands Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. He says that Isaiah prophesied about a young woman who would bear a child and they would call the name of him Emmanuel. Matthew is referring to Isaiah 7:14, which is set in the seventh century BCE and promises that the Southern Kingdom of Judah will be delivered from the threat of war from an alliance of Assyria and the northern kingdom of Ephraim. Isaiah is so sure of this prophecy that he points to a young girl who is pregnant and says it will take place before the unborn child comes of age. This prophecy in its original setting in Isaiah is a promise that God will be with Israel during an international crisis.

Isaiah said they will call the name of the child, Emmanuel, which is translated, "God with us." In Roman theology, the emperor mediated the presence of the gods to the people. In Jewish theology, the Torah was the presence of God. Matthew says that Jesus will reflect the presence of God with the people. Matthew shows Jesus throughout the gospel as the presence of God by calling the disciples, healing the sick, teaching on the meaning of the Law and casting out demons. The gospel of

Matthew ends with the Great Commission, when Jesus promises to be with the disciples always.

Jesus is not God for Matthew, but Jesus is the form in which God will be present with the people. The focus is not on Jesus' essence but on his role in divine salvation.

Third Move: Son of Joseph

Joseph trusts that God is speaking to him through the dream and acts decisively. He obeys the angel of the Lord and does exactly as he commands: he takes Mary into his home and he names the child Jesus. He even does more than the angel commands—he is not intimate with Mary until after the child is born. This is an example of higher righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount.

Joseph is opening himself up to public criticism. He and Mary live in a small town. Word will get around. This is an honor and shame society. Joseph is putting his honor on the line by marrying a pregnant woman. He is taking part of Mary's shame upon himself. Joseph is committing himself to a difficult existence, going against the grain of his culture by following what he understands to be the will of God.

We lift Jesus up as the Son of David and the Son of God. We overlook that he is also a son of Joseph. Joseph is the one whom God entrusted to raise Jesus and teach him values. Perhaps Joseph was the one who taught him liberation theology. Perhaps Joseph taught him to stand up to the ridicule that he would face from the Empire.

Teaching our children values can be a bad thing if we are simply teaching them what the culture expects them to do. That is why Zach Gleason, the Mennonite minister who has preached with me on Peace Sunday, refuses to send his two daughters to public school. He believes strongly that God is a God of non-violence. He doesn't want them to learn competition and militarism. He and some of the members of his congregation at Joy Mennonite have set up a home school for their children.

That is what Mary is doing in Mother's Day Out. It is an alternative to public school for parents who want their children to get religious instruction as part of their education. It is an alternative to most religious schools because we are progressive Christians. All families are welcome here, including people of no faith or little faith. The children have chapel once a week. They learn about a God who loves everybody. Mary teaches children at Thanksgiving how to bake pies and has a party so that the children can serve the pie to their parents. They learn that St. Nicholas leaves candy in children's shoes while they are sleeping and leave their shoes out for St. Nicholas

at naptime. They had a pajama party on the last day of school Thursday and gave gifts to each other.

We are building an alternative community in this church. We are open and affirming. We are green. We are non-violent. We write and visit the prisoners. And we are joyful.

Fred Craddock has a beautiful sermon on today's Scripture. He says that we're still a week away from Christmas, but it's Christmas already because of Joseph. God chose the right guy to be Jesus' dad. We know that when Jesus is born, the man who will teach him, raise him, listen to him, show him how to be a carpenter, take him to the synagogue, teach him the Bible, and teach him his lessons is a good man and he will do right. When you have somebody like that, it's already Christmas, and Christmas will last as long as God finds in every community one person who says, "I will do what is right."

Craddock ends his sermon, "The question, of course, is whether or not you will be that person."

We already have a community of Josephs. Cherrie prepares the lessons at home each week and comes to class with activities planned for our children. Beth has sent birthday cards to every Mother's Day Out children for the past seven years and has sent Kaitlyn cards and handwritten notes throughout the year for the last ten years. John shows our Mother's Day Out students how to plant vegetables in the garden.

The Josephs in our congregation are teaching our children that they are beloved by God, right now, just the way they are.

Conclusion

Our Josephs give me hope. They are filling our children with a sense of self-worth and compassion. They are showing them that God is with them.

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