

Sermon Series: The Advent of the Messiah
Sermon I: "The Christmas Story According to Matthew"
Text: Matthew 1 & 2 – selected verses
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Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way...Matthew 1:18a

Today we begin a new season in the liturgical year. During the four Sundays of Advent, the Christian church looks forward to the birth of Christ with eagerness and expectation. The music, the messages, even the color of the paraments reflect the basic human longing, as ancient as the Hebrew prophets, for a better time. Expectation, mystery, celebration. These are the themes that mark this season. One of the commentators I consulted last week made this wonderful claim, "The Advent proclamation unleashes a power that re-creates the human spirit with its words of expectation." *The proclamation of the Christmas story re-creates the human spirit with its words of expectation* - I love the idea that proclamation really can bring about transformation, that the Advent story has the power to recalibrate our spirits in the direction of hope and joy.

We could use a little recalibration right about now, don't you think? There is really no way to overstate the need for an alternative message to the dour, pessimistic outlook that saturates the atmosphere around us. You would think that the future of the planet depended on whether you or I went shopping on Friday! There is more than shopping or not shopping to think about! The Christmas story speaks of important things, such as God's purposes for justice and righteousness. Christmas offers the promises that the redemption that God intended for the world will not be thwarted, not by Herod and his henchmen, not by the Roman Emperor, not by anything in heaven or on earth. The Christmas story reminds us that we are not alone in this world - "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son. And they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God with us.'"

In the four Gospels, we find the essence of the gospel, the good news, which is essentially this: God became present among us in the birth of the Messiah. That birth was nothing less than the birth of God's own son. This year, Chris and I are going to try to stay out of the way and let the writers of the four Gospels help us understand the meaning of the birth of the Messiah. I pray that the proclamation of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John will transform how you and I look at life, will create a new and hopeful spirit within us.

As I wrote in the church newsletter, over the centuries, Christmas pageants and Christmas carols have gradually blurred the distinction among each of the four

Gospel accounts of the birth of Christ, so that Matthew's magi and Luke's shepherds arrive at the manger all at the same time. Yet, each Gospel writer has a distinctive point to make, a distinctive understanding of the meaning of the incarnation. Today we let Matthew teach us.

The first chapter of Matthew's Gospel is dominated by a long genealogy. Then, throughout the entire second chapter, Matthew tells his story without "sentimentality or romanticism". Who was Matthew? His name means "gift of God." He lived in the second half of the first century of the Common Era and wrote his Gospel some time in the 80's. His audience was largely Jewish, likely, a Jewish group that had separated from the synagogue after disputes over theology and other things. Now, this little community is attempting "to define its own identity and to shape a faithful way of life within the diversity of first century Judaism." The fledgling community existed also in a time and place dominated by Rome. Remember, this story is written in the 80's after the crucifixion of Jesus. It was Rome who had crucified Jesus. Rome and its gods were said to rule the world. The Emperor was understood to be the agent of the gods on earth. "Caesar Augustus, for example, had the titles of Lord, son of God, Bringer of Peace, Savior of the World." Sound familiar? Matthew's Gospel is the counter-narrative to the story of the Empire. It asserts that God, not Caesar, is Lord of all. Yes, Jesus was crucified by the Roman authority, but on the third day he rose again from the dead. Yes, Rome was the agent of evil, specifically of the devil, but the devil will be finally and fully defeated at the time of the return of Jesus in glory.

The genealogy launches the birth story, and it makes the point that Jesus entered the world within the context of history, and specifically within Israel's history. Jesus is the Messiah for whom the Hebrew people have waited. "Christ" is the Greek word; the Hebrew is "Messiah," the anointed, commissioned One. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to make of him and his descendants a blessing for all the earth. He is the direct heir of David the king; yet, his family tree also includes people who were not particularly heroic or famous. The infamous are there, and some, like David and Abraham, have heroic reputations, but plenty of skeletons in their closets. Nobody's perfect in the genealogy. There are women there, surprisingly so - all but one of whom, Mary, were Gentiles, meaning "from the nations". In a moment, we will see in the story of the magi, who came from the Far East, how important it was to Matthew that his community understood that the good news of God's redemption was meant not just for the Hebrew community, but for all the world. As the list of the generations comes to an end, Jesus is identified as Mary's son, not Joseph's. The rest of the chapter explains how and why it is that Mary is given credit for Jesus' birth. Joseph is not included in the birth line, but he is the legal father of Jesus.

Matthew is not particularly interested in the birth of Jesus. In fact, he only refers to it as an aside at the very end of the chapter. "What he cares about are the

conception and the naming.” Remember, Matthew is writing to people who are trying to understand who they are, how their Lord could be a descendent of David. He wants to explain how the arrival of Jesus fits into the long history of Israel and into the broader history of empires that come and go. He also wants his readers to know that if God makes a promise, the promise will be kept. Twelve times in Matthew, he says, “What has been spoken by the prophet has now been fulfilled.” When the Lord promised through the prophet a virgin birth, there was going to be a virgin birth. God’s life-giving Spirit would intercede in a new way, and the son of God would be born on earth.

Though Joseph was not Jesus’ biological father, Matthew wants us to know that Joseph is indispensable to the story. We encounter Joseph when he is engaged to a young woman who has just turned out to be pregnant. He is not the father of the baby. This is a particularly scandalous situation for a righteous Jew to find himself in, not to mention the predicament the pregnant woman found herself in. She could be punished by being stoned to death. We are told by Matthew that Joseph was “a righteous man”. What does righteousness look like in this situation? Should Joseph abide by the law and allow her to be condemned and executed? He could do that, but instead he decides to break the law himself. He does not do what the law requires, but what his personal integrity demands. He goes beyond the strict interpretation of the letter of the law in response to the crisis. Imagine how his pride must have been injured, assuming, as he would have, that his bride had betrayed him. He did not want to expose her to public shame, so he resolves to divorce her.

I think about Joseph and the mess he is in, and I remember a story I likely have told you before about a husband who had a misunderstanding with his wife. He wanted to make things right between them so he ordered flowers for her. He asked the florist to write on the note, “I’m sorry, I love you.” Unfortunately, the flowers arrived with a card that read “I’m sorry I love you.”

For a little while, that must’ve been the way Joseph felt about Mary, but he was a better man than that. The great theologian Søren Kierkegaard thought he was the best person in the Scripture, the perfect example of the kind of fear and trembling that characterizes authentic faith. When you step out and do something that’s hard and difficult, knowing that, even though it’s a frightening thing to do, it is the right thing to do.

When we think of the economic mess our country, indeed our world is in, we wonder how many people, from top to bottom, forgot to ask, “What is the right thing to do?” Not what is the profitable thing to do, but the right thing, the honorable thing to do.

Joseph is the hero in Matthew’s Christmas story. Even though he had at first resolved to divorce Mary, he was open to a change of plans when the Lord appeared to him in a dream. He changed his mind. When he woke up, he took Mary as his wife, because he had become convinced that the child conceived of

her was of the Holy Spirit. Joseph will get to name the baby, though the Angel already had a name picked out. His name will be Jesus, a wonderful Hebrew name that means "God saves." The baby will be the Savior of the people. Joseph becomes the man God wanted him to be, called him to be. He does the socially unacceptable thing, trusting that God will be at work in and through the baby that will be born in a way that God had never been present or active in human history before.

Because Joseph trusted, human history itself has never been the same. Joseph had an indispensable part to play in the genesis of Jesus, whose birth evokes two dramatic responses. First, the Empire rejects him, the Empire being represented by Herod, who could not control his feelings. Actually, this is the second response, the first response being the wise men who had come from the east. Matthew tells us that Herod was upset. Later we are told he was infuriated when he realized that the wise men had tricked him. They had come looking for the one over whose place of birth the star they had seen in the sky had stopped. They had come to Jerusalem to see the new king and to offer him gifts of great value: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Notice, by the way, we are not told how many magi there were. We are told that there were three gifts, but there might have been 30 magi. There might have been two, one of whom brought two gifts. When they were warned in a dream not to give the baby's location away to Herod, the wise men left for their own country by a road other than the one they had traveled to see the One who had been born king of the Jews. That's when Herod became enraged. That is when Herod ordered that all the babies two years old or younger were to be slaughtered.

When the magi left, another angel appeared to Joseph telling him to take the baby and his mother and flee to Egypt until the threat was over. Why Egypt? First, to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet - *out of Egypt I have called my son*. The second reason is that for Matthew, Jesus is the new Moses. Remember how Pharaoh had tried to kill the baby Moses and had ordered the slaughter of another whole population of innocents, while Moses rode down the river in a basket of bulrushes? Remember how in Egypt, the weak and the powerless outsmarted and overcame the powerful and the strong? This is the story of God's redemption, and it goes on generation to generation, because the main character is a God whose mercy is everlasting and whose purposes will finally and fully come to pass.

Matthew is one of the main reasons the story goes on. A weak, unimportant-looking, little community had one in their midst, whose name is Matthew, who took the gloves off and told the hard, heart-breaking part of the story of the birth of the Messiah. There is the silhouette of the cross shadowing Matthew's account, but there is also a deep awareness of the hand of God, the life-giving Spirit of God, who brings life out of death, hope out of despair. There are also great characters like Joseph who make a lot of difference and make each of us want to be better, to do better, to take better care of those that we love, to listen

for guidance from God and then to act boldly, stepping out in faith. Joseph moved all over the place. He took his family to Egypt. When the coast was clear, he brought them back. The birth account ends with Jesus and his family settling in a small village called Nazareth in Galilee. It was clear by then that the holy family had always been under a divine protection plan.

Some scholars say that the first two chapters of Matthew are an overture to the next 26 chapters, that they foreshadow everything that is about to take place in the rest of the Gospel, and in a way it's true. The 28th chapter, the last chapter ends with the risen Christ speaking to his followers saying, "Lo I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Remember the baby Emmanuel, whose name meant "God with us"?

On a personal level, I would add that these first two chapters of Matthew make me realize afresh that the story of the mighty acts of God in history is a story that I belong to and our world still belongs to. Whatever is happening on Wall Street or in Detroit, or in the hotels of Mumbai or the battlefields of Iraq, God is God. Around the edges, under the cover of ordinary life, the new is coming, the one who saves is coming. Meanness is not going to carry the day. The bright light of Bethlehem shines in the night sky. The Herods of this world will never succeed in extinguishing the light of the Christmas story and the hope that it brings.

Our four-year-old grandson loves Luke Skywalker. We brought him some new Star Wars stuff when we visited last week. One of the pieces that we gave him was a sword that lights up. Charlie was delighted. He kept calling it a "light saver". I kept saying, "No, Charlie. It's a "light saber." I've learned you can't win an argument with a four-year-old, but I love the thought of saving the light. What better could we do than to save the light, than to follow the light with gladness, and never concede the day to darkness? Matthew gives us no manger, no shepherds, no multitude of heavenly hosts. Matthew does give us light, and it is not just any light, but the light that leads the way to the place of Jesus' birth. While we wait in darkness for the dawning of a new age, let us say, "Thank you sir." Thank you to Matthew the truth teller, the light saver, the most powerful witness in Scripture to the in-breaking presence of the kingdom of God.

In working on this sermon, I relied on several important resources, including: The Birth of the Messiah, by Raymond E. Brown, Texts for Preaching, Brueggemann, Cousar, etc., and The First Christmas, Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan.