

Christmas at Matthew's House
Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-15, 19-23
December 8, 2019

Clinton G. Roberts
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

Matthew 1:18-25; 2:13-15, 19-23

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

Each week this Advent, we're visiting one of the four "Gospel Homes" to learn about the birth and identity of Jesus.

Last week, we visited the home of Mark, the earliest Gospel in the New Testament. Mark has nothing to say at all about the birth of Jesus, but chooses to begin his story like this: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." As Chip noted in his sermon, Mark's account of Jesus is faced-paced, economical, and to the point, like a home with just two windows, one door, and a roof.

Matthew's home is quite different, as we shall see. It's more like an old Victorian mansion with back stairways, turreted windows and a gabled roof. Matthew's home is a house with a history, meant to be explored, full of antiques and old family pictures going back many generations.

A Deb and I have been setting up residence in the Old Manse next door, our family pictures have all been unpacked and are climbing their way up the back staircase. An old friend of Deb's from high school—and interior decorator and member of this congregation—advised us to put our relatives pretty much out-of-sight, because most people won't care about who they were and might even get creeped-out looking at them! I remember visiting First Pres. years ago and seeing a long line of portraits of former pastors going all the way back to 1859, looking out at me from their heavy frames with silent visages; some smiling—and some not!

Matthew's Gospel begins in much the same way: with a genealogy going back all the way to the Book of Genesis. Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is the true and long-expected Messiah, the Son of David and a child of Abraham.

The genealogy itself covers 52 generations of unbroken succession reaching back a couple of thousand years—which is impressive! How many of us this morning can identify more than 3-4 generations in our family tree? Most Americans aren't sure who all their great-grandparents are and many of us don't know exactly where we came from. Which is why Ancestry.com has gotten so popular. But if you send in a sample of your DNA, you may be in for a surprise! We were surprised to find out that Deb, in addition to being English, has Native-American ancestry from the Cayuga Nation of the Iroquois! A friend of mine recently discovered he had a half-sister living in Texas. He and his brother went down to meet her and had a great time together.

Jesus' genealogy has a few surprises in it as well. For starters, there are four women listed within a long line of men. These remarkable women stand out for a variety of reasons. Two are prostitutes, and the other two are foreigners. Tamar and Rahab's colorful stories are preserved in the Old Testament, as is the beautiful story of Ruth. Bathsheba is mentioned also, who gave birth to David's son Solomon. Matthew's genealogy suggests that not only men are important to Jesus' identity, but women as well—and foreigners at that, like the Magi who came all the way from Persia to pay him homage. Matthew's overriding purpose is to show us that Jesus is a true son of David, Israel's once-and future-king: but he also is showing us that Jesus' family is imperfect, inclusive and wonderfully diverse. The biggest Zinger might just be this: Jesus is named the Son of David not through Mary but through Joseph, who claimed Mary's child as his own by giving him his name. That may be the most important lesson of all about what it really means to be a family: it's about “love-lines,” not “blood-lines.” It's about commitment and belonging

and provision and love, like the woman who told me after her father died this year that this congregation is her “family” now...and it’s the best family she could ever hope to have. Jesus once said, “Who are my mother and sisters and brothers? Those who do the will of God...” That’s the kind of family we’re invited to call our own today—and Jesus is right at the heart of it.

II

The story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem is dominated by two characters in Matthew’s Gospel: Joseph—and King Herod the Great. Herod is political, paranoid and ruthless. Joseph is Herod’s counterpoint: humble, obedient, protective—and courageous.

We know quite a bit about old King Herod, from sources within and beyond the Scriptures. Herod was an Idumean, not an Israelite, who murdered his own family to remain the client of Caesar and King of the Jews. He taxed his own people outrageously in order to build his palaces, harbors, temples and places of refuge, like Masada deep in the desert. He has his own wife and three of his sons murdered, which prompted Augustus to say of him, “It is better to be Herod’s pig (Hys) than his son (Huis).” Truly, the world that Jesus was born into was fraught with violence, oppression, poverty and injustice. People longed for a world of righteousness and peace—as we still do today—and for the Jews, who had been ruled over by foreign powers for 400 years—they longed for the promised Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One, the Son of David, the King who would lead them to greatness again. Instead—they had King Herod!

In Chapter Two, when the Wise men come to Jerusalem looking for the King of the Jews, we are told that King Herod was “troubled,” or frightened, as

some translations say. The word in Greek is “tarazzo,” and means not only frightened but angry, anxious, chaotic and confused. Herod’s attempts to duplicitly employ the Wise men to discern the whereabouts of this newborn King, yet unlike the believing Magi, he cannot see the star! The Magi are led by God to Jesus, as we find these foreigners bowing down to pay homage to Jesus, offering him royal gifts. From this moment on, Matthew stops calling Herod a King...and the Wise men go home by another way.

But what about the other character in the story—what about Joseph?

III

We know that Joseph is of the house and lineage of David—yet he is a humble figure, a resident of Bethlehem and a man who is dealing with a problem-pregnancy. His betrothed wife Mary is “found to be with child,” as the text puts it—and not by Joseph but by someone unknown. The penalty for her adulterous condition under the Law was to be publically stoned to death.

But now, Matthew tells us that Joseph is a “righteous man.” You might think this means Joseph would be a stickler for the rule of law, but here in this Gospel, we learn that Joseph’s “righteousness” made him unwilling to expose Mary to public and disgrace and punishment. We learn from this that real righteousness is lived out by acts of mercy, kindness and grace.

Joseph is a man of few words—in fact—of no words at all. Yet his actions speak for themselves. Joseph believes the word of the Lord, and acts upon it with obedience. He names—and claims Mary’s child as his own. He will be his father on earth as God is in heaven. He will bestow upon him his patrimony and lineage, and he will protect and provide for his little family

with courage and decisiveness—even if it means living as a refugee in a foreign land in order to escape the violence of Herod and Archelaus his son. Indeed, Joseph is the very opposite of Herod—and through him we learn what true manhood is really all about: it’s about kindness, humility, accountability and courage—attributes of character that will never go out of fashion or grow old.

Conclusion

The third character in this holy story is the Child himself. In him we see the promises of God come true: promises made to God’s covenant-people over 52 generations since God first promised Abraham that his family would number more than the stars in the sky or the sand by the sea. Now these promises are being fulfilled—but with a different kind of Savior—and different kind of King—one who will save us from ourselves, wash us clean with his own blood poured out for us, and deliver us from the tyranny of Death into a life that is truly LIFE—a life with God, where there will be no more pain, no more sorrows, no more children struck down by murderous violence, no more refugees seeking safety and peace. Christ is our Peace, and when we finally learn to come home by another way, we will know each other for who we truly are: members of one family—the children of God.

Pope Gregory the Great once said, “Our home is the paradise from which we have fallen...When we come to know Jesus, we can return along the way by which he returned. We left our paradise by our pride and disobedience...our repentance summons us (like the Magi) to return by another way.”

There are many fears and perils in the world—both then and now. This narrative of Jesus’ birth in the Gospel of Matthew assures us that God still

rules this world with truth and grace. Yes—there is, and there will be, injustice and suffering and death—but Christ through his resurrection has overcome Death itself, and with it, all the machinations of the Herods of this world have come—and will come—to nothing.

As the prophet said, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son. And they shall name him Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.”

God still is with us—and we too, like Joseph, can embrace one another, and live life unafraid.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN