

## **Our Gifts. Our Stories: He's Our Man**

### **Matthew 1:1-25**

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When I was growing up, my parents loved researching our family history! Long before ancestry.com or genealogy testing, they would spend hours going through letters and photos, putting together how and when the different branches of the family came to the U.S. More than one family vacation included hanging out in a cemetery while they looked for family graves. As a kid, I found this to be the most boring thing we could do or talk about as a family. It seemed like an endless conversation about a long stream of names of people I had never heard of and would never remember.

So, I had to laugh at myself when I spent a chunk of my time in Scotland last summer researching the family member on my father's side who was the first to make the trip across the Atlantic. And while I will never have the zeal for genealogy that my folks did, I get it now. I understand why it matters. Tracing back your roots helps you understand your place in the unfolding of history. Knowing the names of those who have gone before somehow anchors us and puts a different perspective on our lives and our families. Above all, there is something about knowing who and from where you came that strengthens your sense of identity.

Of course, these are all reasons why Matthew starts his gospel with this very long lineage of Jesus and then tells the story of his conception from Joseph's point of view. This is the third in our series of sermons exploring how and why each of the gospel writers approaches the story of God coming to live among us in the form of the baby, Jesus. Last week, we talked about Luke and how he frames the story in support of his passion for social justice. The week before, we looked at Mark and why he doesn't tell a birth story at all.

This week we enter the story with Matthew whose gospel is sometimes called the most Jewish of the four gospels. Though we call it the gospel of Matthew, no one really knows for sure who the author was, but we can learn a lot about him from how he tells the story. Unlike Luke, which is addressed to Gentiles, scholars believe that Matthew was writing to a community of Jewish Christians, people who were followers of Jesus but continued to follow Jewish law. As Jewish Christians, these folks would have been caught in the middle between those Jews who rejected Jesus as the Messiah and the Gentiles, for whom his identity as a Jew was a non-issue. And, as is so often true, being caught in the middle was an uncomfortable place to be. In accepting Jesus as the Messiah, they were breaking away from the majority of Jews, but they still wanted to practice the law and customs of Judaism.

So, this group, perhaps more than any other that the gospels address, needs a firm, scriptural argument for why they believe Jesus is the Messiah the prophets foretold. It's almost like Matthew is teaching them how to talk with Jews who disagreed with them, how to make the case that Jesus must be the One.

So, what better way for Matthew to prove Jesus's identity than to trace his genealogy? After all, the prophets had said that the Messiah would be from the line of King David. So, Matthew tells us about every generation between David and Jesus. But he doesn't stop there. He

strengthens his case by tracing Jesus' family lineage all the way back to Abraham, the first father of Israel. There can be no doubt that this man, Jesus, fits two basic requirements of the Messiah the Jews were waiting for. He is Jewish and he is a descendant of David.

But one might argue, Jesus was God's son, not Joseph's, so how can this lineage even be relevant? This was a patriarchal society, so the whole genealogy is told through the paternal line, but then what do you do about Joseph? Matthew's wording is very careful. "Joseph the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus, who is called the Messiah". And then, he goes on to tell the story of Mary's pregnancy from Joseph's point of view.

He begins by telling us that Mary and Joseph were engaged. Unfortunately, our word "engaged" doesn't really capture what the legal relationship between them was. Getting married in ancient Judah was a two-step process. Professor Emeritus of New Testament, Arland Hultgren writes, "First came the betrothal, a marriage contract, typically arranged by the parents, that could be broken only by divorce. That was followed by a second step (Hebrew *nissu'in*) considerably later (sometimes a year later), often including a marriage feast, after which the groom took his wife to his home...The drama of our text, however, takes place between the two events in the lives of this young couple. The first step had taken place; the second is in jeopardy."

So, Mary and Joseph are legally bound to each other, but they have not yet had intercourse. When Joseph learns Mary is pregnant, he naturally assumes she has been unfaithful. According to the law, Joseph has little choice but to divorce her. However, the punishment for adultery was public stoning. Joseph is a kind man and doesn't want Mary to be disgraced, so he plans to send her away quietly until...One night, Joseph has a dream in which an angel comes to tell him he needn't worry. Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. He is to complete the marriage process with her and name her son, Jesus.

It is in this act of naming the child, that Joseph legally adopts him, which solves the lineage problem. Jesus is a legal descendant of Abraham and David, even though his father is God, and he is the One the prophets foretold who would come to save God's people.

Another way in which Matthew strengthens his case is by repeatedly tying his gospel to the Hebrew Bible, particularly the prophets. There are at least eleven times in the gospel when Matthew states that something happened in order to fulfill what a prophet foretold. One example is the end of our scripture reading for today, "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." This helps his readers to understand that Jesus must be the Messiah and equips them to make that argument with those who disagree.

Yet, Matthew has another interest in how he presents the gospel, too. He not only wants to prove Jesus's identity, but he also wants to show that Jesus came not just for the Jews but for all people. He does this in an unusual way. In the lineage of 42 generations, mostly Matthew goes through the paternal line. This person was the father of this person who was the father of this person. Yet, Matthew also includes five particular women. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba (the wife of Uriah), and Mary. All of them have unconventional stories, and four of the five, all but Mary, are not Jews. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites. Ruth was a Moabite. And Bathsheba was probably a Hittite.

Not only are they Gentiles, but they also each have a somewhat sketchy past. Tamar secures her own future and the future lineage by tricking her father-in-law into a sexual encounter. Rahab is a prostitute who hid and protected Joshua's spies as he prepared to overtake Jericho. Ruth was a Moabite, who were considered enemies of the Jews, and David took Bathsheba as his wife while she was still married to Uriah. Given all of that in Jesus's family history, perhaps it's not so bad that Mary, who was a Jew, was an unmarried, pregnant teenager.

Just as important, however, is what the presence of these women in Matthew's genealogy reveals about God and God's kin-dom. First of all, if Jesus has at least four Gentiles in his family, then God must not intend for non-Jews to be excluded from the kin-dom. God sent Jesus for the salvation of all people.

Secondly, these women, with their unconventional pasts, would have been outcasts according to Jewish law and culture. Yet, God used them in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. They are part of the story that leads to God's work of salvation through Jesus. Therefore, no one, no matter what they have done, is beyond the love and forgiveness of God, and no one is excluded from participating in God's work in the world. In addition, they all were suffering in oppressive circumstances, brought about by the laws of a patriarchal society. But, as God so often does, God lifts them out of those circumstances, lifts up the lowly, for their own survival but also for the survival of God's people.

Somehow, Matthew manages to pack an awful lot of theology into this first chapter of his gospel. By framing the story as he does, he makes the strongest possible case for Jews to believe in Jesus's identity as the Messiah. Yet, he also introduces important characteristics of God and what it means for God to become one of us. God works in unexpected ways. God works through unexpected people. And perhaps that is the message for us today. We can never know when God will step into our broken world in some way no one anticipated, and nothing anyone of us has ever done, no matter who we are and what we've experienced God has a role for us in the fulfillment of God's kin-dom. Amen.