

Welcome to Matthew
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North Decatur Presbyterian Church
Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.²⁰ As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit."²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."²² Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

²³ *Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,
And they will call him, Emmanuel.* ^[a]
(*Emmanuel* means "God with us.")

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ Jesus came near and spoke to them, "I've received all authority in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of the age."

Beginning today, I'm inviting us to do something that I rarely have done over the years. We are going to read through an entire book of Scripture together. Over the next several months, we will work our way through the gospel of Matthew. If I were a smart man, I would have done this with Obadiah or maybe Jude, because they're tiny. This will take us a few months. Get ready, because sometime in April you will ask, "I wonder what Rev. Lewicki is preaching about today?," and then you'll groan and say... "oh, it's Matthew again." Or maybe not. It could be awesome. Let's find out.

I want to say a few words about this project, about why we're doing it and then a few words about the world of Matthew into which we all will be journeying.

First, *why do this?*

You know by now that I want you to love the Bible like I love it. I want it to come alive, and be a Living Word. It's a gorgeous story. It's so vexing. It's horrid at times. *It is our collective memory about God's presence in the world.*

NUGGETS IMAGE

But the way we usually read the Bible, especially on Sunday, means we only get this great story in bits and pieces. We get the Bible equivalent of chicken nuggets. I love nuggets. Nuggets are tasty.

CHICKEN IMAGE

But it's a whole other thing to receive a whole chicken, feathers and all, and be told, "here's your dinner." The latter is harder, it takes skill, and patience. But by the end, you know a LOT more about chicken—and you appreciate the chicken—more than you do when you eat a nugget.

Many of us, even if we come to church a lot, don't know Our Story very well. Most Americans can't name half of the 10 commandments or even one gospel writer. 1 in 8 believe Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. A lot of us don't know the Bible, but we've been coming to church so long, we're afraid to say it. Peter Gomes, the late great preacher at Harvard, said that the Bible is like someone we met long ago, and we run into often, but we've totally forgotten their name and are too darn embarrassed to ask.

So we're gonna' read this big, important chicken of a gospel called Matthew. Why read this book?

JESUS 1 IMAGE

First of all, we're doing it to meet this guy:

JESUS 2 IMAGE

No, this guy.....

JESUS 3 IMAGE

No, wait, this guy.

I want you to meet Jesus. But who is he? Do you know? Really? There are no existing accounts about Jesus from people who walked with him. We're pretty sure he existed. But what else do we know? He shows up to be baptized by John with thousands of others in the Jordan River. He hangs out with fishermen on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and talks to them about an alternative to the Roman empire. He's a wandering sage around whom magical things seem to happen. People say he transforms their lives through a conversation or a touch. He was killed by the Romans. After he died, people say they saw him again. So convinced of this were they that they risked their lives to live as though Jesus had risen from the dead.

In these next few months, I want you to meet Jesus. And I want you to decide for yourself who he is. We won't assume that we know. We'll let Matthew show us this person. Some of what Matthew says will comfort you. Some of what he says will surprise you. And some of what he says will offend you. That's as it should be.

JESUS WEIRD IMAGE

We're about to meet one of the most beguiling people who has ever walked the earth. Let's agree to Keep Jesus WEIRD.

MATTHEW GOSPEL IMAGE

Let's talk for the last few minutes today about Matthew. Each of the gospel writers are different—they had different audiences and different agendas. One of my colleagues, Cynthia Campbell, says you can think of the four gospels like four different houses. Mark is the oldest and the smallest; Matthew (and Luke) used Mark's floorplan to build their houses, but they added lots more rooms and their own unique details; and John... well, John is that house on Mead Road that looks like a bomb shelter (kidding).

What's cool about Matthew? What do you need to know about Matthew to understand why he builds his "house" the way he does?

- 1) Matthew is the Jewish gospel. Not many of you are Jewish, so I don't expect that to matter to you. A different way of saying this is that Matthew is the writer who most clearly emphasizes the *continuity* of Jesus with the revelations of God from the Hebrew Scriptures.
 - By the 2nd century, Marcion was already saying that Jesus was an entirely different God than the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. Matthew insists, no, it's the same God. God, who made the Creation in 7 days, who told Noah to build the ark, who told Sarah she was going to have a baby, who made a covenant with a shepherd named David, God, who spoke to the prophets words of rebuke to the unjust kings—that same God is now known to us in this human person named Jesus.
 - This old God has decided to do a very new thing by becoming a human being.

Throughout Matthew, as you read, you will find reference after reference to the Hebrew scriptures. He's constantly saying, "as it says in the prophets," and then he'll drop a quote from Isaiah to "show" that what happens in Jesus is connected to those prophets.

You literary geeks will know Matthew's technique is called "Intertextuality"—can I say that in church? It just means a text that references back to another text.

MLK IMAGE

- An example of intertextuality that you all know is Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. King begins, "Five score years ago," and cribbing Abraham Lincoln. And when he says, "one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal," he is quoting the Declaration of Independence. And when he says, "I have a dream that one day every hill shall be exalted and every mountain shall be made low, the rough places

will be made plains and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together," he is quoting Isaiah.

Matthew makes us look back and read these old stories again. What were they really about? What are the through lines to which Matthew is pointing? Why, for example, does Matthew want us to see Jesus as the new Moses?

MATTHEW GOSPEL IMAGE

My hope is that all of us will get good at doing what Matthew does so well—go back into the past, retrieve the parts of the past that help us illustrate the meaning of the present. American Christianity right now, in case you haven't noticed, is a hot mess. We're under the sway of theology that treats the Bible literally, that has told us that Christianity has more to say about sex than it does money. All of that is wrong. But you can't just say "it's wrong." Let's go deep into our tradition—let's find the threads of continuity that illuminate the present. Let's draw the connections between the wilderness God known as "I AM" to the desert mothers and fathers, to the Celts, to Dorothy Day, to the multiracial, spirit-filled witness of Pentecostalism. Our task in the present moment, when so much of the church is overrun by bad theology and so much of the church is boring, is to do what Matthew does: to identify the threads of the past and gather them up and to re-weave a credible and compelling understanding of what it looks like to live life with God in this present moment.

- A few years ago, the UCC came up with a great motto: "*God is still speaking.*" The same God is still at work. But how? Where? That's a question that Matthew provokes... so it's a question we, too, must ask.

- 2) There's one other thing I want to name about Matthew's gospel that you should know as we begin. Matthew's gospel demands that if you follow Jesus, your life should look different.

Matthew projects the life of Jesus as an ethical project. Matthew's Jesus says your core ethical requirements are to "Love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (interestingly, both of those are "intertextual" references!)

We can handle that. I mean... not every day. Not all the time... but that's within our reach, right? Oh, but my man, Matthew, goes a bit further than that... he goes the second mile.

It's one thing not to hurt people, but Matthew says if you get angry at your brother or sister or if you call people names, you're in danger of a fiery hell. It's not enough to not commit adultery, Matthew's Jesus says if you even feel lust, that's as good as the actual thing. He says if any of your body parts are tempting you to sin, it's better for you to cut them off! And those of you who like hemming and hawing and equivocating: stop it! "Let your yes be a yes and your no a no." If people slap you on the cheek, give them the other one to slap, too. If they take your shirt, give them your underpants so you're naked as a jaybird. Give to everyone who asks, don't refuse anyone who wants to borrow. If someone harms you, you must forgive them—not just

once, but again and again and again. Got too much money? Give it away. Do you love others? Great! Love everyone... even... especially your enemies.

LOVE ENEMIES IMAGE

You've heard the only thing you need to do to be Christian is accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Matthew's got some other ideas.

When I was a teenager, and I began to read the gospels for myself, I encountered these instructions of Jesus. Now, granted, I was a bit of a weird kid in my conservative Ohio suburb, but I thought this Jesus was *amazing*! But when I looked around at my liberal Presbyterian Church, I thought, "none of these folks *are actually doing these things*—these people are a bunch of hypocrites." Now I AM one of those hypocrites.

Seriously, though. Are we? Matthew begs us to ask questions like: "what do we expect the life of a follower of Jesus to look like? What do we do with our money, and our anger, and our enemies? What ethical standards do we hold each other to? What do we hold ourselves to?"

ICON SCREEN

I expect Matthew's focus on ethics will be exciting to many of us North Decatur Presbyterian Church folks. We're a congregation that has made its name on ethics. We're the church that embodies the gospel. Not just love your neighbor—that's ethics 101. We're at 200 and 300 level ethics: Shed your white privilege for Jesus. Give up your possessions to feed and house others for Jesus. Visit the sick and the those in prison for Jesus. Throw yourself into the machinery of war-making and economic exploitation for Jesus. We're a Matthew 25 church, right?

Except Matthew's ethics teeter headlong into a life that feels... impossible. Forgiven seven times seventy times? Love your enemy? Lose your life for Jesus? Can anyone live this way?

Matthew's ethics push us to the limit of what is possible. And beyond. They push us so far beyond what is normal and comfortable that we begin to wonder what Matthew's driving at. Maybe ethics is not a list of rules for us to follow and enforce.

Jesus ethics in Matthew are an invitation to an encounter. In this gospel, we encounter something—someone—who throws our whole world for a loop. "Turn your life around," he declares, "the Kingdom of heaven is here." But this kingdom... what is it?

It's like a mustard seed. Which is a weed.

It's like yeast, which, when you mix it with the bread, makes the bread unholy.

The kingdom of God is like a treasure that was hidden and someone else found.

The kingdom, the empire of God, is the world turned upside down. Jesus disturbs you and provokes you. Happy, are those who are poor. Those who are weak. Those who mourn.

We know this is not the way that the world works. And yet... we are drawn in to this counter culture, this new empire, where Love always carries the day. Matthew insists that your encounter with Jesus and with the Realm of God is so beautiful, so compelling, that you will be changed. Not just your actions. Your inner being. You are changed from the inside. Nothing that was impossible will seem so anymore.

It will be possible, because in this new reality, God is with us. Jesus, Emmanuel, God is with us. Then, and now, and always.

So, what do you think? Are you up for reading a little Matthew together?