

The Christmas Story, according to Matthew

1 An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, **3** and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, **4** and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, **5** and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, **6** and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, **7** and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, **8** and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, **9** and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, **10** and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, ^[f] and Amos^[g] the father of Josiah, **11** and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

12 And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, **13** and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, **14** and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, **15** and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, **16** and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus, who is called the Messiah.

17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, ^[i]fourteen generations.

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah^[j] took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. **19** Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her

quietly. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, ^[k] and he named him Jesus.

The Visit of the Magi

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Christmas According to Matthew

Matthew 1 & 2

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

Reading Matthew's story of the Birth of Jesus can be a little dis-orienting. He really jumps around. Matthew has 3 distinct "movements" to his Christmas story: a genealogy; a look at Mary and Joseph, with a focus on Joseph; and the story of the magi who see in the stars a sign that a powerful king is being born.

What does Matthew want you to know about Jesus that requires these three distinct movements?

First, a genealogy. It's a mighty dull way to start a story. "Bogat, bogat, bogat." Who are these people? And why should I care about them? What is a "Zerubbabel?"

Matthew is effectively giving you *your* family tree. Matthew's audience is Jewish, and this is a Jewish family tree. It begins with Abraham and Sarah, who, you remember, were the first in a long line of *super ordinary* people chosen by God to live in this covenant relationship. When you read Genesis and you encounter the stories about Abraham, Isaac, Leah, Rebekah, Jacob, Esau, and Joseph and his brothers, it's a bit shocking how ordinary they are. They lie, they cheat, they hurt each other. And they are often kind and generous, and selfless, and shrewd.

Reading Genesis, it's clear the people God has chosen to covenant with are like us. God's faithfulness moves through ordinary people. Yes, there are kings in this family. There are knuckleheads and creeps. Sometimes they're one and the same. It's not the people who make this genealogy powerful—it's God. God is faithful in each generation.

Matthew begins his story of Jesus by saying, "this is a story of *continuity*." Yes, Jesus is something new in the divine-human relationship. But the God who is in Jesus is not. Your ancestors knew the same God. It's the God they prayed to when life became too much; it's the God they sang praises to in every grace-filled moment. This God held your parents and your parents' parents, all the way back. Life in Jesus is continuity.

A few among you will already have noted that in Matthew's beautifully-ordered genealogy there are wrinkles. The chain of begetting men is broken by the inclusion of women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth. Surprising, perhaps. Even more surprising is that not all of the ancestors in this deeply Jewish family tree are Jewish! There are Canaanites and Moabites. Why are women and foreigners intruding on this family? Maybe Matthew wants you to know that our God of continuity is also a God who is full of surprises.

Matthew shifts his lens from the long arc of salvation history to an extreme close-up of one single family. While Luke shows us Mary, Matthew wants you to see Joseph. As we move directly

to Joseph from the genealogy, knowing that Joseph belongs to “the house of David,” we might expect Joseph to be a distinguished, even regal father figure. But what we get from Matthew is a much more complicated person.

Joseph is told that he’s not the father of Mary’s child. Despite 18 verses rooting us in the importance of begetting, Joseph won’t beget this child. That’s the first slight he endures. The second is even more intense: he is told that he must take on the shame of marrying a girl who is carrying someone else’s child. Joseph is a man who is forced into subversive re-configuration of male identity. His status in the world will not come from siring children; he must embrace shame in a culture in which honor and shame are the currency of one’s social standing. Joseph will be a different kind of man. He will care for a child who is not his own. He will care for a partner when that care brings shame upon him.

In Joseph, Matthew shows us that Jesus’ arrival will turn you inside out. Like Joseph, you may find yourself defying cultural norms, and doing “shameful” things all because that’s what love requires.

Matthew shifts his lens one final time, to focus on the magi, the star, and the king. This is the part of Matthew’s Christmas story when we finally nod in recognition. There are no carols written about the genealogy, but there are plenty of tunes about the “three kings.” Who are they? They are not kings. They are “scholars,” or “scientists.” The ancient near east was a place of learning. Matthew weaves these three intelligent souls into the Jesus story. They are watching the sky, watching the stars. Suddenly, they see an unusually bright star—they know it’s a sign. The gods have placed a marker in the heavens to announce a royal birth. They pack up and go on a search to find the newborn.

Matthew’s journey of the magi, in the hands of poets, is a parable for our search for meaning in the mystery of God in the flesh. We are all magi. Thoughtful, rational, curious.

What the magi find when they reach the place where the star brought them, is confounding. Under the star, there is no royal court. There is no king. There is no palace. No army. No riches. The star leads them to a backwater town of the Roman Empire. They find an exhausted mother, a bewildered father. It is a normal human birth. They leave their gifts. They return home avoiding the king with the evil gleam in his eye. What were they supposed to have seen? Why glorify the birth of this insignificant child? What kind of trick is this Hebrew God playing, to place a gleaming star over this nothing, this nobody? There is some mystery here that defies rational explanation.

Matthew wrote his Christmas story a long time ago. But it still carries power.

It says that God is faithful in every generation—even in those people who came before you don’t look faithful to us, just as we won’t appear faithful to the people who come after us. But God is faithful in every generation. This same God is more likely than not to try something new.

Matthew says that Jesus will lead us into subversive ways of loving. We may have to resist or reject our culture, or re-define the roles of parent or care-giver. Non-traditional families are the new normal. Foster families. Taking care of kids who aren't ours. One family in our neighborhood met a homeless mother and her children at the fridge and took them into their own home. In the world that Jesus brings, love will call you to do strange, wonderful things.

Finally, Matthew's Christmas story affirms that we are on one of the great journeys that any human being goes on—the journey to marry what is in the mind with what is in the heart. Scholars and scientists can bear witness to God's revelation—the heavens are telling the glory of God. Learning and faith are compatible. But we, like the magi, will see things in Jesus that don't make sense. We can't explain them with reference to anything else we know. But these things are beautiful enough that we cannot help but draw closer and even worship.

Continuity. Surprise. Subversive love. Wonder. Christmas according to Matthew.

