

Can you believe it? We can count on one hand the days left until Christmas Eve. And today in our advent series we will take a look at the Gospel of Matthew. The Gospel, the Good News from Matthew's point of view. Which is God with us. God with us for all the world, including the Gentiles! And Gentiles indeed play a significant role in Matthew's version of the birth story. We will be firsthand witnesses of the Gifts the Gentiles give to the coming of the Light of the World. Our advent series is based on the Advent Study, Light of the World by Dr. Amy-Jill Levine.

Let's start with some comparisons between the birth stories of Luke and Matthew. Last week we looked at the birth story through the detailed and genius eyes of Luke. But Matthew's account brings its own sense of literary genius. Like Luke, Matthew will give us a storyline that challenges, provokes, shocks, and I hope, makes you want to hear more. I did hear you say you want to hear more.

While Luke primarily focuses on Mary's story, Matthew will focus on Joseph. Matthew has the Magi instead of shepherds. Matthew begins his story in Bethlehem and then follows with their flight to Egypt. After King Herod, who wanted to kill Jesus, dies, they do not return to Bethlehem in Judea but to Nazareth in Galilee. This was to avoid Herod's equally evil son Archelaus who ruled over Judea. Luke is focused on Jesus' role as the heir of David, while Matthew is focused on highlighting Jesus as a new Moses. Like Luke, Matthew emphasizes faithfulness to Torah and the prophets, but Matthew includes quotes from the Torah and the Prophets to show Jesus' connection with them.

Now this is going to come as a total shock, but sometimes scholars take liberties with these differences and try to make these discrepancies a question of authenticity. Trying to say that the differences in these stories calls into question the entire tradition. To that I say. For shame, for shame, for shame. Luke even says there are other versions of the story when he says in 1:3, "I, too, decided, as one having a grasp of everything from the start, to write a well-ordered account for you, most excellent Theophilus."

If we were merely historians, we could be satisfied with a question like, “What did these stories say to the people who first heard them?” But our task is deeper church family. For us reading this today, we are asked to consider the question, “What do these stories mean to us, or what have they meant to our community and our traditions over time and across the globe.

Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus. Who besides me has raced through these first seventeen verses to get to the part where it says, “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place?” Guilty as charged. But by doing this we miss several of Matthew’s major concerns. So let’s not skip those verses this time. Let’s look at a few things that take this genealogy from boring to fascinating.

Luke starts with Jesus and traces all the way back to Adam. Matthew’s genealogy starts with Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. Matthew wants to make sure everybody, and I mean EVERYBODY knows that Jesus is deeply embedded in Jewish tradition. As the son of David, Jesus inherits the throne. As the son of Abraham, Jesus is a continuation of the promise made to our father of Judaism. Jesus as “the Messiah” will preserve ancient traditions while offering his own interpretations of them.

Matthew’s genealogy mentions not 1, not 2, not 3, but 4 women before introducing Mary. Mentioning women in a genealogy itself is not unusual. What is unusual is the type of women that Matthew mentions. They are not beloved matriarchs like Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel. Oh, no, no, no, no. Tamar is the first woman mentioned in the New Testament. Tamar is the widowed daughter-in-law of Judah (one of Jacob’s 12 sons). Although by levirate law it should have been required, Judah refuses to let the widow Tamar marry his youngest son. What’s a girl to do? She has no children and now, no prospects. So she poses as a prostitute to Judah, conceives and gives birth to twins. Her trump card when he accuses her of adultery? The payment she received from him of his signet, his cord, and his staff. Judah reluctantly admits that she is more righteous than he is.

Next, we have Rahab, a true prostitute living in Jericho. She helps the Israelite spies, as they scout out the area. And come on folks, we know the reason for these spies visiting a brothel was

totally legit right? Right? But Rahab is remembered for the actions she took to protect them and enable the invasion of Jericho.

We also have Ruth. Beloved Ruth. This is the Moabite widow who wouldn't leave her Mother-in-Law Naomi. "Wherever you go, I will go". Ruth is a descendant of Lot. A descendant of a people formed through incest. She also charms Boaz of Bethlehem on the threshing floor. She becomes his wife and the great-grandmother of David.

Last but not least we have "she of Uriah". That would be Bathsheba, the mother of King Solomon. She became David's wife after he gets her pregnant and then has her husband, Uriah, killed on the front line.

So why, why would Matthew include these women of questionable reputation in the genealogy of Jesus? First, to show that women are contributors to salvation history. Second, all four mentioned were involved in unexpected sexual relationships. Perhaps a foreshadowing of Joseph learning that his betrothed is pregnant.

Third, these women represent various family structures. Tamar was a levirate widow. Rahab was a single mother supporting her family. Ruth was a widow, loyal to the mother of her deceased husband. Bathsheba is forced to have relations with David, even though she is married to Uriah. When David learns she is pregnant, he arranges for Uriah's death so he can marry her. The stuff of soap operas, right?

One more thing. Three of these women are Gentiles. Rahab was a Canaanite, Ruth a Moabite, Uriah and Bathsheba? Hittites. Matthew is setting the stage for the end of this Gospel, where Jesus will command his disciples to "Make disciples of all nations."

Towards the end of Matthew's genealogy, we get this. "Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary – of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ". Now, I know already you are all questioning this. You all remember Luke's genealogy. And how Luke lists a different father, Heli. So what in the world is Matthew doing? Did he get it wrong? Did Luke get it wrong? Or was Matthew using the names Jacob and Joseph together strategically? When those

reading Matthew's gospel would read that Jacob is the father of Joseph, can you think of any other Hebrew Bible characters they might remember?

Yes, they would be taken all the way back to Genesis. To the Jacob who had twelve sons. To the Jacob where one of those sons was named Joseph. Joseph son by Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife. This is a famous Joseph in the Hebrew bible. And not because of his amazing technicolor dreamcoat." Matthew would want his readers to remember that Joseph was a dreamer and that he was sold by his brothers into slavery which landed him in Egypt. That he would eventually save all of Egypt and his family from famine. Joseph died in Egypt, but his bones were eventually returned to Israel, as promised, by Moses.

With all of this knowledge of the original Joseph, Matthew's readers would be filled with anticipation. This second Joseph would also be a dreamer. He would also take his family to Egypt to protect them. He would return to Israel, but not to Judea. He would return to Galilee. Which just so happens to be the land given to one of Joseph's sons, Ephraim. All of our anticipation will not be in vain.

Now let's get to the good stuff. Because now we have Joseph and Mary. They are legally betrothed but not yet married. They are bound culturally and legally. Mary was expected to remain faithful to Joseph. So imagine his surprise when Joseph learns that Mary, his betrothed, was pregnant. "by the Holy Spirit." Yeah right. And anyway, Joseph doesn't know that part yet. All he knows is that his wife-to-be is also a mother-to-be and he is not happy at all.

Let's look at what he doesn't do? He doesn't make a public exhibition of Mary. As we read, Joseph is a righteous man. A *Dikaios* man which from Greek is typically translated as just. Being a just and righteous man, he decides to divorce Mary quietly. No public stink. No demand for money. An engagement was a legal contract, and a divorce would be required for nullification.

Some have suggested that Matthew did this to prevent Mary from being stoned for adultery. But maybe there's more to this. After all, David and Bathsheba were clearly adulterous and lived to

tell about it. Maybe there is a more noble reason. Like, maybe Mary was in love with someone else or maybe he was concerned for Mary's reputation. Maybe, just maybe, Joseph actually loved her. Also, if the divorce happened, Mary and her baby would be cared for by the community in Nazareth. Imagine that, Joseph leading with kindness instead of contempt?

On the brink of divorce, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream. Joseph is told that Mary's child is from the Holy Spirit and that he should marry her and that he should name the child Jesus because he will "save his people from their sins." And would you believe it? The name Jesus comes from the Hebrew root meaning "To Save."

Convinced Joseph? Need more assurance? How about this prophecy. "Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel. Emmanuel means 'God with us.'" This is a direct quote from Isaiah 7:14. Matthew's point with including this passage from Isaiah is this. This birth would be miraculous. Whatever arguments over the way moving from Hebrew to Greek changes the mean of the words, can we perhaps agree that Isaiah's words or any other passage of scripture will mean and should mean different things to different people at different times. Just like different Bible translations give rise to different interpretations. After all, a Bible translation is actually an interpretation of the Bible.

So instead of the first questionable part of the prophecy, how about we turn to the second part. The part where we read that they will call this baby, "Emmanuel, God with us." The presence of the divine found in Jesus. Jesus will reinforce this all the way to the end when he says. "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Jesus who saves and Emmanuel, God with us. Both go together. This child will both be with his followers and will save them.

So Church Family, here's where I leave you with a cliff hanger. Because there is more to the story. We still have to talk about the Magi and the flight to Egypt. But we're going to save that for January 4th. After all, that is the day we celebrate Epiphany.

For now, let's remember that God's work can come from unexpected people and unexpected places. God uses those who seem least likely to be chosen. Keepers of the ancient traditions of Abraham along with prostitutes, adulterers and foreigners. Never discount anyone, including yourself. Say this with me. I will never discount anyone, including myself. We all have the ability to remind our neighbors that Jesus saves and is with us everywhere and always. So for now let's rest in the anticipation of the birth of Jesus and angels bending near the earth.