

Isaiah 7:10-16
Matthew 1:18-25

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Covenant

Christmas at Matthew's House
By Clara D. Thompson

Last week at Covenant, on the first Sunday of Advent, we celebrated Christmas at Mark's House as we learned what the Gospel writer of Mark has to say about the birth of Jesus. As it turns out, not much. There are no birth narratives in Mark's Gospel; Jesus is already an adult when that Gospel begins. Mark's Gospel begins with John the baptizer proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. So, as Pastor Charlie said last week, at Christmas things are pretty quiet at Mark's House. "At Mark's house it's time to get rid of the junk and get ready for something special, something new." This morning, we're celebrating Christmas at Matthew's House looking at what is unique about the birth stories of Jesus as found in the Gospel According to Matthew. (Anybody want to place bets as to whose house we'll be celebrating Christmas at next week? I'll give you a hint: It's getting easier; there are only two Gospels left!)

One of the unique things about Matthew's Gospel is how he begins. Matthew Chapter 1, verse 1, the very FIRST words from Matthew's pen: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." The genealogy begins and ends with the affirmation that Jesus is the Messiah, the long awaited one, the one who would fulfill Jewish expectations that someone would come to save God's people. We read a list of Jesus' ancestors, going all the way back to Abraham, 42 generations in all according to Matthew's account, though admittedly Matthew isn't too worried about being chronologically precise. One of the things that is unique about Matthew's genealogy is that he includes more than just the great Jewish men in his outline. He actually includes four Gentile women: Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba (though he refers to her only as "the wife of Uriah"). It is suggested by some scholars that Matthew wished to demonstrate that Jesus is the savior of all people and all nations, both women and men, both non-Jews and Jews alike. AND, many of the men and three of the women have rather unsavory backgrounds. Matthew doesn't glorify Jesus' family tree or make it any purer than it really is.

And you know, I think that's good news for you and for me because, if Jesus the Messiah has some questionable folks in his ancestry, then I think it might make us feel better about our own families. Most of us have some rather unusual (I like to say "unique") members in our family trees. Though there are certainly people in my ancestry of whom I can be exceedingly proud, I also have a rather dubious character in my family tree as well ... If you're familiar with Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*, you may remember Rebecca Towne Nurse ... she was a pious woman of faith back in the late 1600s, a member of a well-respected family in Salem Village, Massachusetts. I am related to her on my mother's side. At the age of 71 Rebecca Nurse was accused of witchcraft. (I'm telling you this true story in order to help you be happy that I'm retiring in a week!). Though she was wrongly accused and later exonerated, she was hanged in the Salem Witch trials. My ancestor. (Clara does a "witchy face.")

So, having first provided us with Jesus' pedigree, Matthew gets to Christmas at his house: Read Matthew 1:18-25.

So, what is Christmas at Matthew's House like? Well, aside from all of the pictures of generations past found along the walls, I suspect that there would be constant talking. Old family stories would be told each year, and perhaps embellished a bit with each re-telling, for whereas Mark was rather succinct in his Gospel, Matthew likes to add extra details. Matthew's Gospel is also the one that tells the story of Jesus' birth almost as if from Joseph's perspective. And Joseph is listed in the genealogy, though not as Jesus' father but as "the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born." (Matthew 1:16) It is at Matthew's House that we learn what Joseph was thinking, as he planned to dismiss Mary quietly rather than to expose her to public disgrace. In Matthew's Gospel we learn of an angel appearing to Joseph in a dream. He was told not to sweat the details of Mary's unexpected pregnancy; that the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. The angel also tells Joseph that they are to name the baby boy Jesus because he will save his people from their sins, all of this in fulfillment of Old Testament prophesy: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." Wow!

Matthew's Gospel is the only Gospel that makes the clear and specific connection of Jesus to the OT prophesy which names the child Emmanuel, God with us. Though all of the Gospel writers in one way or another say that Jesus is the embodiment of God with us, Matthew actually names him as such. And that connection, for me, is the most wonderful part of Christmas at Matthew's House. Emmanuel, God is with us, with all of us. No matter who we are or who our ancestors are. No matter if our family gets along wonderfully well or if we're pretty messed up. Most families have at least one person who is a little unique; perhaps someone in the family feels left out for some reason either real or imagined; there's likely someone who just flat out annoys you. And if your family is perfect and everyone gets along all of the time, well then, good for you. But that's not the world that most of us live in. It's not my world. So I'm glad to celebrate Christmas at Matthew's House because there I can look at the pictures on the wall and say, "Yup, there's Uncle Harry, a rather weird duck, but God was with him. And there's great Aunt Mable who always brought to Christmas dinner her infamous green bean tator-tot casserole lovingly held together by cream of mushroom soup, and God bless her: God was with her too. And if God can be with all of my unique family members well, then, I guess that means God is with me too." And you know what else? This very same Emmanuel will say at the very END of Matthew's Gospel, the very LAST words from Matthew's pen are these words of Jesus to his disciples and I believe to each of us and to all, "And remember," Jesus says, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." THAT'S the good news for us this day. This day, and every day! Thanks be to God! Amen.