

## Genesis

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

*Fourth Sunday of Advent/ 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2019*

We start at the beginning. Not the beginning of the Bible, but there is a genesis to celebrate. In order to “hear” what Matthew is trying to say to us, we need to start at the beginning of his Gospel.

Don’t worry, I’m not going to read the genealogy in Matthew 1. Its long sixteen verses contain, in the language of the King James Version, forty-one “begats.” “Abraham begat Isaac, and Isaac begat Jacob,” and so on, father to son forty-one times across forty-two generations down to Joseph. Spend some time there and you’ll see that it’s an odd family tree. It has unknown personalities. It’s not accurate; it leaves out some and includes others one might want to exclude from a family tree. Even Jesus had skeletons in his closet.

The way Matthew tells it, the lineage soars and reaches a starry height with David, and then everything starts to fizzle out. After David you have the misery of the Babylonian exile for fourteen generations, the return from Babylon and more misery under and after Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE), followed by a whole slew of Caesars for another fourteen generations. It’s not a pretty story. And we have the inclusion of four women in the genealogy who were not models of virtue and respectability, introducing a taint in the ancestry of Christ: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba.<sup>1</sup> I won’t go into the details. It’s almost Christmas, after all, and there are children present. But Matthew doesn’t hold back. The entire genealogy is a sad one; actually, it’s scandalous—which is interesting, given that later in Matthew we learn that Jesus is associated with scandal. “Blessed is anyone,” Jesus said, “who is not scandalized by me”(Matthew 11:6).

So go back to the beginning of Matthew, which reads, literally, “A book about the *genesis* of Jesus Christ” (Mt. 1:1) *Genesis* can be translated, “generation,” or “genealogy,” as in the NRSV, or “origin;” it can also mean “lineage,” “descent,” “nativity,” “birth,” even “nature, life,” and “existence.” And so after forty-two generations containing scandal here comes a new one. Joseph, the last descendant, a “son of David” the King, has nothing royal about him, he’s a poor craftsman<sup>2</sup> who would have remained invisible to history but for the birth of a son—who is not technically his son, but the son of God. If you think about it, Jesus is neither Joseph’s son nor David’s nor Abraham’s. The bloodline is dead. The blessing that comes with the bloodline is missing. The lineage peters out and appears almost meaningless.<sup>3</sup> And *that’s* scandalous. That’s tough to hear, especially when you’re suffering under Roman rule and wondering why God won’t save you from them. Matthew wants us to know all of this to prepare us for what comes next.

Here’s where the narrative continues, at verse 18: “Now the genesis of Jesus the Christ took place in this way” (Mt. 1:18). The NRSV reads “birth,” but in the Greek it reads *genesis*, as in Mt 1:1, thus linking us back to the beginning of the Gospel. It’s only then (!) does Matthew give us the story of the birth of the Christ. For Matthew, Jesus is a new genesis, a new beginning for God’s people and for the world. The birth of Jesus is set within the continuity of God’s

determination to save us and be with us, and yet his birth is also a radical break from the way God has acted in the past. Something new is breaking forth into history with this unique birth. And Joseph doesn't know what to do with all it—and if we're completely honest, neither do we.

Joseph is scared. It's one of the main takeaways of Matthew's account. Luke's Gospel, by contrast, tells about Mary's favored status and bravery and willing consent to God's plan, then breaks out in a song of praise and protest, as we saw [last week](#) (Luke 1:26-56). Joseph is scared. Sure, we're told that he's a "righteous" man. And Matthew wants us to know this, because righteousness is important to Matthew; he uses some form of the word twenty-six times in his Gospel. Righteousness is what is expected from a disciple of Jesus. Righteousness is essentially doing the will of God—however discerning the will of God is difficult and it's even more difficult actually doing it. Throughout Matthew, Jesus is the truly righteous one who comes to do the will of God. In Matthew, Jesus is calling his followers to be righteous. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," Jesus preached, "for they will be filled" (Mt.5:6). And it's essential to know that righteousness does not mean being morally pure or perfect or blameless. Instead, righteousness describes one who does the will of God, who treasures the will of God and hungers for it, who then puts one's heart into doing it (Mt. 6:21). God doesn't want your perfection—but your heart. Doing the will of God requires a heart that is open and alive and aligned with God's desire for wholeness and justice and mercy.<sup>4</sup>

So, yes, we're told that Joseph was a "righteous" man. Then why is he so *afraid*? Why is he so fearful? The text suggests that it's Joseph's way of being righteous, of trying to be faithful, trying to do the will of God, which might be triggering his fear, thus standing in the way of God's plan of redemption.<sup>5</sup> Joseph is scared and nervous. He's in a terrible bind. And now *he's* caught in a scandal. Mary is pregnant and they're not married—essentially married, but not officially. It was shameful, humiliating, disgraceful and immoral in the eyes of Jewish society, and for Joseph and Mary. And Joseph was righteous, which, again, doesn't mean that he was a nice guy or a good man or a gentleman, but that he's trying to follow God's Law, he's "scrupulous about keeping the commandments of God, the Old Testament law, striving to live his life in harmony with the will of God, to follow to the letter all of the provisions of the Mosaic law."<sup>6</sup> We would say he's a religiously conservative man, a traditionalist. And he's facing a profound ethical crisis. He's afraid—afraid of getting it wrong, anxious about getting it right, worried about God's judgment, nervous about how he and Mary and even the child will be perceived by society. And when he finally comes up with a plan to save himself and his reputation, and possibly Mary's and the child's, it's a decision driven by fear. How do we know this? Because he has a dream—and it's in the dream that we discover just how fearful he really was.

For a power greater than Joseph confronts him in the darkness of the night: "Joseph, son of David..." Now we might hear this as a title of honor, but given the long genealogy we just heard about and the sorry state of the Davidic line, one has to wonder if that's the intent and if that's how Joseph heard it. *Joseph, son of David...*

What if he heard this salutation and said to himself, "Yes, I am the son of David, and of Bathsheba, ...I am the offspring of adultery and murder"?<sup>7</sup>

What if he realized, then, that he had nothing to be proud about, that he couldn't claim the righteousness of his family line?

*Remember who are...and where you come from, Joseph. You're not as righteous as you think you are. But fear not. Fear not.* "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She is to bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus,"—meaning "Yahweh saves"—for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt. 1:20-21). Look, Joseph, look what God is about to do! Don't be afraid. "God is with you." This Jesus has another name, Emmanuel.<sup>8</sup> God has not abandoned you or God's people.

Joseph has to accept the scandal. He has to accept that Mary's motherhood is the will of God. Indeed, God is about to do something new through this child, through this birth, through this one. Emmanuel is a new beginning—God's new genesis.

Emmanuel is our new being.

Emmanuel is always our genesis.

And when Joseph awakes from the dream he rises from sleep a new man. He leaves the darkness of night and steps out to walk in the light of the Lord (Is. 2:5). Now, it's a genesis for him. He discovers that being righteous is not about being pure or perfect or trying to behave like a good little boy or girl, trying to make and keep God happy, but joining one's heart with the heart of God and being about God's redemptive work in the world. Deciding and acting from his heart, Joseph knows what he has to do, no matter the cost to him or his reputation or ego or pride. He understands, now, how he fits into the genealogy, he discovers his task, he accepts the work of his life. "And he took his wife," Matthew tells us. He didn't dismiss her. Joseph obeyed. He could have ignored his dream. Instead, Joseph yields to a force greater than himself. He accepts his destiny, the burden of his call, the vocation of his life, to help God "father" into the world the Christ, the savior of all people. And Joseph—*Joseph*—names him Jesus (Mt. 1:25).

So thanks be to God for Joseph and all the Josephs in the world and the "Joseph" in you and me. Confronted by God's scandalous ways of loving the world, Joseph discovered something that is true for each of us. He discovered in the dream that, deep down, your life is not your own. It doesn't belong to you to do as you wish. We have been entrusted with life so that our lives can help "father" God's hope into the world—and "mother" that love, bear that love into the world. Our lives—as small and seemingly insignificant as they are or seem to be—are embedded in a much larger story or drama of God's mission of redemption and reconciliation. We are essential characters in God's ongoing nativity play. We are part of this story that's still being told.

And Joseph shows us there comes a time when we have to give up our plans for our lives and our personal agendas, face our fears, swallow our pride, confess our arrogance and ignorance, and question everything we thought we ever knew about God and what God expects from us, to prepare the way for Emmanuel, to listen to the voice of the ages, and obey, and consent to the scandalous summons of the Living God—to yield and bow and ultimately kneel before the mystery of the Incarnation. God with us. Our genesis.



Alexander Ivanov (1806-1858), *Joseph's Dream* (1855).

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<sup>1</sup> Tamar (incest), Rahab (a harlot), Ruth (a foreigner/outsider), and Bathsheba (adultery and murder).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 13:55 tells us that Joseph was a *tekton*, often translated as “carpenter,” although it is more accurately rendered as “craftsman” or “builder” with either wood or stone.

<sup>3</sup> This is an unconventional reading of the text by German psychologist Fritz Künkel (1889-1956), which I find persuasive. See *Creation Continues: A Psychological Interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 34-35. This sermon is informed by Künkel’s provocative approach to the Matthew’s Gospel.

<sup>4</sup> See Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing* (Baker Academic, 2018), 73ff.

<sup>5</sup> Alyce M. McKenzie, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 15.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Künkel, 36.

<sup>8</sup> Mt. 1:24, citing Is. 7:14.