

Matthew 1-2

Portraits at the Manger

Each of the gospels paints a somewhat different picture of Jesus. Our tendency, however, is to combine these portraits into one. In so doing, we lose their distinctiveness and in turn the nuanced fullness of each portrait as it stands on its own. During the season of Advent, we will be looking at the beginning of each gospel and examining the particular portrait that it paints of Jesus.

Matthew begins the story of Jesus with a genealogy. For the gospel, Jesus will be both a new Moses and new David, so Matthew begins by rooting Jesus into the story of God with the children of Israel. Matthew traces the lineage back to Abraham claiming that in Jesus the blessing to the nations that Abraham's seed will be is finding its fulfillment. While the genealogy focuses on the male heir lineage of Jesus, four women are hidden in the journey through the generations: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. Many debate the purpose of these women in the list, but each of their stories contains an unexpected, and at times sordid, detail that one would not expect to be shared. That is, their stories point to God's work in surprising places and unexpected people. Grace does not always follow a straight line and Mary, following in the footsteps of these four women, becomes an example of that grace, as she is the unexpected and surprising mother of Jesus.

Following the genealogy, we find the story of Joseph receiving a visit from an angel (we will see that in Luke's gospel the angel visits Mary). This angelic visitor gives Joseph a particular set of God's commands – you will marry, she will bear a son, you will name him Jesus. Joseph, being a righteous man, does exactly what the angel tells him to do. For the gospel of Matthew, Joseph is the prime image of what it means to be a disciple or member of Jesus' family – he does the will of God without question (see Matthew 12:50 – where Jesus points to the disciples and says, “whoever does the will of my Father...is my brother and sister and mother.”) Matthew tells us that Joseph marries Mary, she bears a son and he names the boy Jesus – following the will of God to a tee. Joseph opens a theme that runs throughout the gospel, as Jesus is the one who tells the will of God to the world and the disciples are those that follow that will in their lives. Matthew pictures Jesus as the one who calls us to a radical obedience to the will of God, and Joseph is the first who models this for all future disciples.

After the birth of Jesus, Matthew informs us about visitors (typically called the three wisemen) who come from afar, because a king has been born. These wise ones arrive in Jerusalem and make their inquiry to the highest authorities, in fact all the way to King Herod. Herod inquires of the leaders and while they know where the birth of a new king might occur (Bethlehem), they were not aware that such a birth had occurred. There is deep irony here, that those who were expecting a king (the Jewish religious leaders) missed the birth and outsiders/people from far away saw the signs and recognized the birth. This theme will play out throughout the gospel as the local political and religious leaders will not understand and, in fact, will directly oppose the ministry and teaching of Jesus, while the “outsiders” will see Jesus for who he is. This theme culminates with the charge to the disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, bookending the story of this Jewish messiah with the message reaching the nations (represented by the wise ones at the beginning and the command of Jesus at the end).

While Matthew paints Jesus as rooted in Judaism, the message is for the world and the wisemen signal this truth as the beginning of the gospel.

Finally, as noted earlier, Matthew tells the story of Jesus in such a way that he is the new Moses – for instance, like Moses Jesus gives commandments from the mountain top. This theme is introduced by the strange story, that never makes the Christmas pageants, of the slaughter of the innocents. Threatened by the birth of a new king, Herod orders the killing of all children two and under in Bethlehem, much the same way that Pharaoh had ordered the killing of the Hebrew children in Exodus. Jesus, like Moses, escapes because of the actions of his family and eventually comes out of Egypt, just like Moses. Again, for Matthew the call of discipleship which demands radical obedience comes from one like Moses who has been anticipated (“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. Deuteronomy 18:15) and who presents new instruction (law/torah) from the mountain, calling disciples to follow this new way (that does not overturn, but fulfill the old way).

Key text:

1:18-25 - Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Reflection questions:

1. The four women in the genealogy show us that God can and does work in the most unexpected places and unexpected ways. Where have you seen God at work in unexpected places or ways?
2. Matthew 1: 18-25 is undoubtedly the most familiar and likely the most comfortable portion of Matthew 1 & 2, but there are some uncomfortable elements to the stories that surround the story of Jesus' birth. Take some time to sit with both chapters, listening for what God may be saying to you in the unfamiliar and uncomfortable passages. How do these chapters call you to radical obedience?

