

Christmas At Matthew's House

Matthew 1:18-25

First Presbyterian Church

Charlotte, NC

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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 will 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.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

What do you most look forward to during Advent?

This is the question I asked the Tuesday Morning Bible study two weeks ago during the first session of our Advent study together. One person responded without hesitation: “having my children at home.” Several others in the circle echoed this answer, and some shared details about special family traditions at Christmas.

For many of us, being with family is what makes Christmas Christmas. Ask any young adult who’s had to miss Christmas at home because of work responsibilities or anyone who’s served in the military and spent Christmas deployed overseas. Being apart from your loved ones just doesn’t seem right at Christmas; part of what makes the day special is that togetherness with your family at home.

The gospel writer of Matthew would agree with that statement.

Our sermon series this Advent is about how the gospel writers’ would’ve celebrated Christmas in their homes. Last week, Pen took us to Mark’s house, and the austerity of Mark’s home – its noticeable lack of twinkle lights, wreaths, trees, or other familiar decorations – reminded us that the familiar things of the season are only a small part of what Christmas is about; the birth of Christ helps us to weather those seasons when life goes off-script.

Matthew’s take is a bit different.

When you walk into Matthew’s home at Christmas, or any time of the year for that matter, one of the first things you’ll notice is the pictures on the wall in his entryway. There are at least 50 of them – crowded together, some slightly crooked, and covering the wall from floor

to ceiling, pictures of men and women some of whom are still living and others who died centuries ago.

There's a photo gallery like this on one of the walls in the Session room upstairs. It includes the picture of almost every pastor to serve First Presbyterian since 1827. Some of these pastors look stern and aloof, while others have kind eyes and smile warmly. Some of them have served within our collective lifetime – Lee Stoffel, Mary Katherine Robinson, and Christopher Edmonston. Others died before any of us here were even born – Abner Leavensworth, Alexander Sinclair, and John Alexander Preston.

The photo gallery in Matthew's home is similar except the photos aren't of pastors but of generations of relatives - great-great-great-great grandfathers, distant cousins, and several women whose lives could've inspired the saying "well-behaved women rarely make history."

Matthew's wall of family photos is the visual version of the genealogy that Katherine read earlier. For Matthew, we can trace the Good News of Gospel way back to the beginning of Scripture, and to the beginning of Jesus' earthly life as an infant, and both of those beginnings, according to the second gospel, look like family.

You may have recognized some of the names Katherine read in the account of Jesus' genealogy.

Let's be honest and acknowledge that there is a real temptation to skip over genealogies when we're reading Scripture – they're so long! And the names are so strange and hard to

pronounce! And we don't know who these people are! But this one in Matthew – despite not being the most exciting way to begin a story – is especially worth our time and attention.

There's Abraham, who, as Scripture and that catchy Sunday School song teach us, has many sons. He's the one with whom God makes a covenant way back in Genesis to give him many descendants and also to give him land for his descendants to call home.

There's Jacob who, after a late night wrestling match with God, walks with a limp and receives a new name to reflect his struggle with God: "Israel." Between his four wives, Israel fathers twelve sons whose families become the twelve tribes of Israel.

A few centuries later, there's David, who becomes the king of Israel when his father calls him in from the fields where he's been taking care of sheep. Even though he's the youngest of his father's children, God chooses him to serve as king.

These men that Matthew lists as ancestors of Jesus are giants of the faith. Their names are mentioned every year at Christmas at this gospel writer's home. Their pictures are dusted off, and they're pointed out to arriving guests as the main characters and heroes of the family's earliest stories about God.

There is pride in remembering their stories and claiming them as ancestors. They are the ones who inspire us and who we hope we might be at least a little bit like since some of their blood runs in our veins, and some of their genes are in our DNA too.

Christmas and the good news of the Gospel that comes to us in Jesus' birth, Matthew tells us, is about family. It's about knowing to whom you are connected, whose stories are part of your story, and remembering the faithfulness of those who came before you.

Lest we get too sentimental and schmaltzy here, Matthew gives us a reality check.

The truth, as many of us know from personal experience, is that family is messy. We love our family, but there are many times when we do not like them. Family can be the greatest blessing and the greatest challenge – sometimes simultaneously. There's a verse in Proverbs that says, "A friend loves at all times, and kinsfolk [family] are born for adversity." The first half of that verse shows up on greeting cards and needlepoint pillows, but it's hard to find that part about family and adversity anywhere. I wonder though if that might be the message that needs to be shared.

Those Christmas gatherings with our family members? They're lovely and heart-warming... until they're not. As one of my favorite poets, Brian Andreas writes, there are three rules for a successful holiday: 1. Get together with family; 2. Relive old times; and 3. Get out before it blows.

There's a reason that there advice columns focus on how to navigate difficult family relationships this time each year. How do you have a conversation with your sister about how her son taught your kindergartner a new vocabulary of four-letter vocabulary words? What do you when your alcoholic cousin is drunk before the meal is served and starts a fight with your uncle? How do you respond when your mother-in-law never volunteers to bring something to Christmas dinner but also insists on giving a running critique of the meal you've prepared?

No doubt about it: family is tough.

This truth is not lost on Matthew.

Those giants of the faith he includes in the genealogy? He knew, as did his readers, that they were not all sinless like Jesus. Abraham slept with his wife's handmaid when it didn't look like God was going to follow through on the promise about descendants. Jacob lied to his blind father and tricked his older brother Esau out of his rightful birthright. David found himself smitten with the beautiful Bathsheba and arranged for her husband to be killed in battle so that he could marry her.

Then, in a surprising and unconventional genealogical twist, Matthew names five women in the ancestry. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary – none of whom is known for her spotless reputation. If anything, their stories are things that family arguments are made of.

Tamar got caught up in a conflict with her dishonest father-in-law Judah after her husband and his son died, and she ended up having two children with Judah after she disguised herself as a prostitute.

Rahab actually was a prostitute and secretly hid Israelite spies in her home so they could get some insider info about the military strategies of Jericho's army before they launched their own attack on the city.

Ruth was a foreigner who really should have gone back to her home country after her husband died, but instead she chose to stay with her mother-in-law Naomi. Naomi suggested that Ruth go work in the fields owned by one of her relatives Boaz, and she also offered the

advice that Ruth woo Boaz with her womanly charms on the threshing floor so that he might marry her. Suffice it to say the plan worked.

Liars, adulterers, prostitutes... clearly, this is a family tree with some scraggly and tangled limbs. Matthew doesn't do any trimming; if anything, he makes it even messier. You may have noticed that Matthew started out by saying that he was reciting the ancestry of Jesus, but when he got to the present day, the family tie was through Joseph, who, though fatherly, wasn't Jesus' biological father.

When Matthew invites you over for Christmas, you should expect to see the whole world there. As far as he's concerned, when the angel told Joseph that Mary's child would be called "Emmanuel" – God with us – the "us" he's talking about is "all y'all" – everyone. Matthew stretches the definition of family and welcomes all people in for Christmas, and lets us know that the Good News of Jesus Christ will ask us to do the same.

"God with us" will disrupt some things about our lives – not the least of which is who we consider to be our family, the people whose well-being we attend to and care for. Yes, it's your foul-mouthed nephew, alcoholic cousin, and critical mother-in-law, but it's also the person in front of you in the grocery store check-out line, the homeless man you see at the same intersection every day on your way to work, the child who told your son he couldn't sit next to him at lunch, the mother who can't find a hospital to take her sick child in Syria.

When you show up for Christmas at Matthew's house, know that all of your relatives are also invited: the ones you know and the ones you don't, the ones you like and the ones you

don't, the ones you claim and the ones you don't - and if that sounds like the opposite of Good News to you, well, Matthew may say "too bad."

It's not that the frustration and hurt of family aren't real because they are, and there are many of us in this sanctuary who, at this very moment, could easily name a relative who has been the source of pain and difficulty in your life. I don't think Matthew would downplay that or ignore it. But Matthew has a larger view, a perspective that reminds us that God's story began long before we came into this world and will continue long after we meet our Maker face to face. All along, from the first chapter of Genesis, God has been working through sinful and ordinary people to do some incredible and extraordinary things – the greatest of which God is about to do through Jesus.

So when Matthew invites everyone to his home, he also issues an invitation to be careful - especially those of us who have beautifully decorated homes (and sanctuaries) and dress ourselves and our family members up in beautiful clothes for Christmas. Be careful that we don't dress up this story too much because Lord knows it wasn't dressed up to begin with.

The Good News that comes into the world with the birth of Jesus the Christ is that we don't have to hide behind pretense for God, and our lives and our families don't have to look like a Norman Rockwell painting. The One who created us and loves us come to us personally, in human flesh, in part so that we too can claim our humanity with each other.

In just a few minutes, we'll celebrate the sacrament of communion. We tend to think of communion as a remembrance of the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples before he died, which it is. But it's more than that too – it's reminder that we are members of Christ's family,

which means we're members of each other's family. At the table, we are assured that Jesus comes to us in this mess; far from deterring God from being in relationship with us, our mess is what makes God's coming to us in Jesus all the more reason to rejoice. So we bring all of ourselves and all of our story – our proudest moments and our biggest mistakes and regrets – to this table, and we can be assured that we find ourselves in good company.

Sister and brothers, welcome to the family.