

Christmas at Matthew's House
Matthew 1:18-25
Springdale Presbyterian Church
December 8, 2019

Introduction¹

How do you celebrate Christmas?

What family traditions do you have?

What decorations must be displayed?

What foods must be on the table?

What carols do you need to sing

so you can feel like it's really and truly Christmas?

Well, just as we have *our* traditions,

the four gospels have *theirs* too.

Mark, Matthew, Luke and John each take a unique approach...

and this Advent, Heather and I

are taking you on a tour of their homes

to see how each one tells the story of the birth of Jesus.

Last week, we visited Cousin Mark.

Mark wasn't much for tinsel and garland.

Instead, he took us out to the wilderness

where we all live at some time or another...

and when Jesus arrives, he meets us there.

The second house on our tour of homes

belongs to Uncle Matthew.

¹ From a sermon by Scott Black Johnston – “Christmas at Matthew's House,” December 9, 2018.

Matthew's house looks nothing like Mark's place.

Here, there are cars jamming the driveway
and double-parked at the curb.

There are angels and lights!

Next to the garage, Matthew sets up a creche...
strapping a neon star to his chimney.

Lining the walk are three life-size,
glowing plastic statues of the magi.

None of the other houses on the block

honor these astronomers from the East.

Matthew makes them a big deal.

Matthew's house is full of people – all sorts of people

(insiders and outsiders, locals and foreigners)

all holding glasses of cider and plates of food...

and standing around an enormous tree.

But it's not your typical Christmas tree,

It's a family tree...

because Matthew's Christmas is a family reunion.

Do you have a relative who spends a good amount of time

on Ancestry.com? Most families do!

If so, tell 'em they'll love Matthew's house...

because here, there's a huge, extended family

getting ready for the birth of a baby.

To prepare, our host has pulled out charts
and yellowed family photos to show that this baby
comes from an established bloodline
going all the way back to Father Abraham.

But upon closer inspection
we can tell there is something odd about this.

First, it's not exactly an Ancestry.com list...
meaning it is not as much data-driven
as it is theologically driven.

Another thing you notice
is that though Matthew's genealogy
includes all the usual "greats of the faith" -
folks like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David...
he also refuses to scrub out the "imperfections"
and includes some unexpected names
like Tamar and Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba.

Matthew traces a careful line –
beginning with Father Abraham
(spanning forty-two generations)
and ending with Joseph the husband of Mary,
to whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.²

Listen now for God's Word as it echoes to us

² Matthew 1:16

from the very beginning of the Gospel according to Matthew,

Chapter 1, verses 18-25:

¹⁸This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

²⁰But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

²²All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

²⁴When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. ²⁵But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

Sermon

In the back of your bulletin this morning,

we printed a picture of one of the many artistic representations
of what the church calls the “Annunciation.”

What you see is actually two panels of a triptych

which now resides in the Metropolitan Museum of Art
in New York City.³

The main panel (on the left)

seeks to capture the angel Gabriel’s annunciation to Mary.

It is the largest of the three and clearly the central focus.

Painted in strikingly bright colors,

Mary is draped in rich finery with her prayer book in hand.

Gabriel is poised at her side, just about to give her the news.

It’s hard to see,

but if you look just below the windows on the left

there is a tiny figure of the Christ-child bearing a cross
descending on a beam of light

that comes to rest in a starburst on Mary’s lap.⁴

The beauty and rich religious symbolism

communicate the sacredness of this event.

³ Thanks to Willimon, William, *The Second Disciple*, Pulpit Resource, Vol. 32, No. 4, p. 50 for this reference.

⁴ See http://www.artchive.com/artchive/C/campin/merode_altarpiece.jpg.html, or http://www.metmuseum.org/Works_Of_Art/viewOne.asp?dep=7&viewMode=0&item=56.70

To the right, in a much smaller panel,
 is a man at work in a small, rather dingy workshop.
He is clearly much older than Mary...
 sitting alone at his workbench...
 carpenter tools strewn around him.
Behind him an open window
 reveals a typical small town at work.
One thing you notice is the contrast with the central panel...
 there is nothing religious in the scene –
 no angel, no prayer book...
 no candle, no beam of light...
 no Christ child descending.
Just an old man hard at work in his carpenter's shop.⁵

This man's name is Joseph...

 and Joseph is a crucial guest at Matthew's house.

Amidst the music and laughter of the family reunion,

 he is over there - sitting in the corner...

 looking like the weight of the world is on his shoulders.

His fiancée is pregnant... the baby is not his.

 He is a good man... he wants to do the right thing...

 so he contemplates, as the gospel puts it,

 "dismissing Mary quietly."

And he has ALMOST decided

 to drop Mary off at the Nazareth House for Unwed Mothers

 when he gets visited

 by none other than God's personal courier.

The angel encourages Joseph to wed Mary,

 to accept the child growing in her womb,

⁵ Willimon, again.

and to give that child a name.

Simply put, the angel asks Joseph to adopt Jesus...

and the question is WHY?

Why does God ask Joseph to stay involved?

Why does God's messenger ask this carpenter –

who is NOT the child's biological father - r

to adopt Mary's baby?

The answer Matthew gives is fascinating:

"God," the angel tells Joseph,

"is in the middle of the mess

that you find so morally troubling.

The same God who was there

in all the not-so-pretty, difficult events

shaping your family tree,

is in the midst of this moment."

"Not only is it POSSIBLE for God

to work in the midst of a mess," explains the angel,

"but God actually has authored this unconventional situation

involving your betrothed, Mary.

Pay attention, Joseph. Do you hear what I am saying?

It's you who has been adopted!

In and through this baby,

you and your family

(stretching all the way back to Abraham)

have been adopted by God."⁶

Now, admittedly, that's a lot for a regular old guy to take in.

A guy who wakes up one day to find his life wrecked –

his wife pregnant

(though he had absolutely nothing to do with it)...

his trust betrayed

(though he had been utterly faithful)...

his future irrevocably changed

by forces completely beyond his control.

That's A LOT to take in...

and for me the most powerful thing

about visiting Matthew's house this Christmas

is learning what Joseph dies...

learning that Joseph surveys his life

(or I should say, this "mess" he used to call a life)...

and decides to believe that God is in it.⁷

With every right to just divorce Mary

and put this little scandal behind him.

Instead he claims it... adopts it... and gives it its name.

And because he does...

this "mess" becomes the place where the Messiah is born.

It can be the same with us... I truly believe it can!

Presented day after day

with circumstances beyond our control...

living lives we would never have chosen for ourselves...

sorely tempted to just divorce ourselves from it all...

we turn around to find that out of nowhere

an angel is whispering in our ears:

"Do not fear. God is here.

It may not be the life you had planned,

but if you will permit it,

God will be born here too." Amen.

⁶ Johnston, again.

⁷ Ibid, p. 157.