

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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Joe's House

Laura Bentley

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Matthew 1:1, 17-25

Introduction

Each week of Advent, we are encountering the Christmas story anew through a different Gospel lens.

Today, Matthew invites us into his Gospel narrative. The book of the genesis of Jesus the Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. Though Matthew was not the first Gospel written, it is the first Gospel in our Bibles. This is because Matthew is a deeply Jewish Gospel, and it immediately places the origin of Jesus within the covenant story of God and the Jewish people.

To begin the story of a world-changing person with their origins is not radical for intime or in the first century.

But this family tree is far from the expected.

Yes, great men of the Hebrew Bible are there—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and Amos. The women who complicate and enrich these stories, too. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah (Bethsheba), and Mary.

Foreigners, widows, sex workers, women who caught great men in lies and deceit. Women who were assaulted, coerced, or who made a way for themselves where their status offered no way.

The Hebrew Bible does not shy away from the fullness of humanity in relationship to God and one another—and neither does Matthew.

Jesus' story is rooted in the Jewish story. The weak tumble the strong. The younger siblings prevail over the elder. Covenants are broken...and God restores.

And then the biggest scandal of all: This is the family tree of Joseph, the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus. Not the father.

Matthew welcomes us into Joseph's house, where a motley crew of sinners and saints gathers, where there are stories of remarkable courage and stunning silence in the face of wrongdoing, where there is the greatest trust in God's promises and the starkest fear and uncertainty.

Imagine pulling up to Christmas at Joe's place.

You'll be regaled by heroic stories of times past, and you'll be shocked by who shows up and how little is swept under the rug.

It is an old house. Pretty unimpressive on the outside. Some paint peeling, bricks that need to be repointed. The lawn decorations are sometimes a little much for the neighbors. But inside it is warm, bigger than it appears from the outside, with mismatched furniture that allows seats for everyone around the fireplace; rooms renovated over time to allow more space for visitors and more room at the dining table.

Matthew invites us to Joe's house this Christmas. While we're looking for parking, because the place is a zoo and a neighbor left their parking chair in the only open spot, will you join me in prayer:

God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and Joseph,
God of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary,
You invite us into a story woven through human folly and flourishing,
where complicated histories are not hidden,
and where your grace meets us right in the truth of our lives.

By your Spirit, make your Word a light,
that we might see where you are with us,
as we are and as the world is, today.
Amen.

Scripture: Matthew 1:1, 17-25

We will skip a full reading of Jesus' genealogy, according to Matthew, but I encourage you to return to this passage this week and read it for yourself. See who you recognize within it.

1 An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah,^[c] the son of David, the son of Abraham...

¹⁷ So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

¹⁸ 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 pregnant from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, “God is with us.”²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Actions Speak Louder

You may have noticed something odd in this reading: Joseph never speaks. Not because an angel has silenced him. Not because of his disbelief or unfaithfulness. He just doesn't speak. He acts.

Mary and Joseph were engaged to be married. This was a legally and religiously binding covenant between their two families. To break an engagement by way of an affair was illegal and sinful.

Joseph had two reasonable options before him: He could make a public accusation against Mary—which was unlikely at this time to lead to stoning but could lead to mob action against her or, at the very least, lifelong ostracization for her and her child. Or he could divorce Mary and dissolve their engagement quietly—possibly endangering his own reputation.

He chose option two, taking the risk of this scandal upon himself.

But just as he had made a decision, he had a dream. “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid.” And an angel presented—demanded—a third way: Take Mary as your wife. Raise her son as your own. This child was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and he is the long-awaited Messiah.

God spoke to Joseph and told him to do what he was taught never to do—forsake honor, forsake the wisdom of elders, forsake the customs of his people—to trust this dream and God's promise over any common sense.

And he does.

“Do not be afraid,” the angel tells Joseph, and somehow, he is not.

Angels are described in Scripture less as sweet cherubs and more as many eyed flying creatures or human-looking, yet intimidating and otherworldly messengers. I encourage you after worship to google Biblical accurate Christmas tree angel. I hope you can be as delighted and horrified by it as I am.

Regardless of the messenger, a dream that is really a vision from God is a frightful thing. God doesn't often show up to tell us just to stay the course—God is disruptive. For Joseph to be told to put himself at such risk—reputationally, and as we will learn, physically, as well—is terrifying.

But what can drive out fear? Just being told not to be afraid, right?

Don't worry. Don't sweat it. Just stop fixating and spiraling and gaming out every possible scenario. Just don't. That will fix it.

Of course not!

Nadia Bolz-Weber imagines that the angel's words are not, in fact, empty platitudes, but that they truly drive out fear. How is that possible? Scripture tells us: *With perfect love. Love drives out fear.*

The messenger of God comes in a dream, and God's loving presence for, with, and in Joseph drives out his fear so that he can do the next right thing.

And that is what we see Joseph do again and again: Act out of love in the face of great uncertainty and fear.

Family of God

Joseph takes Mary as his wife. And the child is born in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Joseph's ancestor, David. Eight days later, Joseph names him.

Naming in this time and culture was claiming. Jesus becomes Joseph's son. Not by blood, but by choice. Jesus is grafted into the lineage of King David by Joseph's act of grace. And Joseph, along with all his ancestors, the entire motley line of Jews and Gentiles, flawed men and crafty women, patriarchs, royalty, and prophets, find their fulfillment in this child, God and human, conceived by Spirit and flesh, finally God-with-us come to save us.

There's a little bit of, "Who adopted who?" in the Christmas story.

Jesus belongs to this family, Joseph and Mary, who will protect him, feed him, care for him, raise him. Jesus belongs to the people who came before him, who made a way through the many wildernesses that they encountered for him to come into the world.

But in him, they—and we—belong to God. "Who is my mother and brother?" Jesus will later say, "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my mother and brother and sister." (Matthew 12:48, 50)

Joseph and his unwieldy family line is Jesus' chosen family. God's chosen family.

As is Mary, as are Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John, as are these strange foreign astrologers who will come with gifts and troubling dreams, as are the fishermen, zealots, tax collectors, loudmouths, the faith- and doubt-filled disciples who will follow him, as are Mary Magdalene and Mary and Martha of Bethany and Lazarus, as are the poor, the sick, the outcast, the hungry, the imprisoned, Jews and Gentiles, men, women, eunuchs, soldiers, traitors...you thought Joe's house was full? Jesus' is overflowing. And somehow there is more than enough to go around.

Jesus' family line extends through Paul and Silas and Lydia and Junia...to every saint and sinner saved by grace along the way to you and me, here and now.

You belong in Jesus' family, in God's household. There is a seat pulled up for you at his table. For some of us, family has not provided the belonging, protection, and love for which we long. For some, family has been a place of fear, coercion, of being cast out. We belong to God. God has chosen you.

Joseph claimed Jesus as his own. An act of grace.

And Jesus claims every soul searching for belonging as his own by his grace.

Tale of Two Josephs

Our text today ends with Jesus being named. But Joseph's story in Matthew continues...if only for a little longer. Joseph will have another dream, an angel warning him that King Herod is after the child. Joseph will flee with his family to Egypt.

Joseph doesn't hesitate. The fear driven from his heart, he acts to protect.

Where will they stay? How will he make a living? Who will help them? Will they be robbed, get sick, be hungry and thirsty, wander lost on the long journey?

I have taken 6-7-hour car rides with toddlers. With snacks and toys and restrooms with running water on the way—and it is still daunting.

I think of the refugee families that we have helped settle. The trust they had to have, that someone would show up and welcome them.

“Remember,” God tells the Hebrew people, “You were strangers in the land of Egypt. Treat the stranger as a native-born among you. Love the stranger as yourself” (Leviticus 19:33-34).

Joseph's family lineage is marked by deportation. Exile. Fourteen generations from Abraham to David. From covenant to the height of power. Fourteen from David to the deportation to Babylon. Fourteen from living as exiles in Babylon to the coming of Christ. And finally, the Holy Family themselves fleeing to live as strangers in a strange land.

Another Joseph lived in a precarious state, as a foreigner in a foreign land. The Joseph of the Hebrew Bible interpreted dreams, and from Egypt saved his family (though they betrayed him) and the lives of countless Egyptians (though they held him captive). “What you intended for harm,” he asserted, “God worked for good.”

God-with-Us

There is a Japanese art, called, "Kintsugi." Perhaps you've seen or heard of it. Artists repair broken pottery by mending the cracks with gold. Rather than hiding the brokenness, kintsugi highlights the history of the object and imbues that history with beauty.

We have fragmented and fractured ourselves in a thousand different ways. We cannot ignore the fissures, simply paper over them. But God is working for good, and we belong to God. When we act on the promise that Christ blesses the poor in spirit, grieving, meek, those longing for this world to be made right, the merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and persecuted; when we act on the promise that Jesus is among the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers to our land, the vulnerable, the sick, and the imprisoned... then the cracks that divide us between my people and those people are repaired little by little. Each time we walk the path of Joseph and open our lives in welcome, the brokenness is not just repaired, it is made beautiful, shimmering with gold.

If we take this season of Advent to heart, we will long for words to be incarnate, to be made flesh and blood. God promises to be with us and that is not an empty platitude. Imagine again, Joe's house. In the entry way is a sign. It's a little kitschy, but Joe loves that it hangs there as a sign of welcome to whoever crosses his threshold.

It reads: **Joe's House Rules**

1. Do not be afraid...I know there is much fear, but fear has little to do with what God is up to. Act from love, always.

2. Pay attention, God might be nudging you in unexpected ways.
Sometimes dreams are more than just dreams.
3. When in doubt, choose mercy.
4. Claim people with love, not DNA tests.
5. Don't panic—but when God says go, go.
6. Make room, then make more room... the house may look small, but hospitality stretches walls in ways carpenters can't.
7. Seriously, do not be afraid. Love is in charge here.

God keeps showing up in surprising places and people, in flesh and blood, those who we can choose to treat as “our people.”

Do you remember how Matthew's Gospel ends?

Go! Make disciples of all nations. Baptize, teach, tell them about Jesus and what he taught...maybe tell them like Joseph by how you act. And remember, Christ is with you.

So...

Go, be a stranger somewhere. Go, expand your table. Go, roll out the welcome mat. Do not be afraid to open wide your hearts, your homes, and your lives. God is with us. Amen.



WESTMINSTER

2040 Washington Road

Pittsburgh, PA 15241

412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org