



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Gather 'Round All You Dreamers

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Neither the Gospel of Mark nor the Gospel of John say a word about Jesus' birth. In both of those testimonies, Jesus makes a grand entrance at the Jordan River for his baptism as an adult and then launches right into his ministry.

The writers of Matthew and Luke's gospels took a different route. Both imagined his birth and wrote of the people who God chose to make a path for our savior's arrival. They share in a few details and differ in others.¹

This Advent we will explore Joseph, the shepherds, and Mary, whom these writers claimed were part of Jesus' birth as we, "Gather 'round the manger" in this sermon series.

For the next four weeks, we will slowdown in our reading, place them in the context of first century Palestine, let the writers' simple words put flesh and personality into ancient characters, show us the risks they took, and how their lives were changed. Through their encounter with the divine, we can wonder what we might have done.

Sometime around the year 80 of the Common Era, Jewish Christian lived in in a Syrian community along with other Jews and Gentiles. This writer of Matthew's gospel, who for ease, we will call Matthew, believed the man named Jesus, had been raised from the dead and was their long-prophesied Messiah.

¹ Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, (New York: Doubleday, 1993). I am indebted to Brown's scholarship of the birth narratives in the gospels, historical commentaries, and the varied theologies of our savior.

At that time, to confess Jesus as Messiah, placed you in the crosshairs of Rome. The ruling establishment defended Caesar as the divine, son of god.

Matthew persists and writes a story of salvation. But it is not a new story. He plumbs the depth of Israelite history and begins his gospel, by starting with Abraham as “the father of,” detailing a long genealogy of obtuse names over twenty-eight generations.

He includes in the Israelite family tree of patriarchs the two exiles and slavery the people endured, and four women, with their own amount of scandal. This long list culminates with “Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary – of who Jesus was born, who is called the Christ.”

Before I read, please pray with me.

Dear God, we wonder about your birth into human life. Who was there? How did they know it was you? What did it cost them? We wonder because we hope to experience your presence in our lives today. Who are we that you might care? How will we know? Will our faith demand anything of us? As we read this story, calm us to hear it as if for the first time. Startle us with the truth. Invite us to the manger. Amen.

Matthew 1:18-15

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 with child from the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss 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 conceive and bear 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 wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

When Matthew wrote his testimony of Jesus the Messiah, he didn't choose someone with political or business success to name and care for him. Nor did he craft a new path from

heaven to earth. Both alternatives would have been persuasive to people like him, who were looking for hope amidst a bleak landscape of political, social, economic, and religious oppression.

Matthew roots the story of salvation into a well-worn history. Whomever this savior is, he comes from their family, formed from the same grit and faith their ancestors bequeathed to them.

He asks his readers to remember this genealogy of real people with real challenges as he paints a family portrait of Joseph, who was the son of Jacob. These names alone would spark the memory of readers who knew the charming novella from the Book of Genesis.

That ancient Jacob was a dreamer. On the run, he sleeps alone in the desert, dreams of angels ascending and descending a ladder, to let him know, God is with him. Later, this same Jacob wrestles with God all night before God changes his name to Israel. Of Israel's twelve sons, Joseph is his favorite. Joseph also is a dreamer. He sees visions of the future that run counter to established norms and interprets them with accuracy.

Maybe you don't recall the biblical story of Jacob and Joseph, but you might have seen the Broadway production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. The musical revived the story with principal messages of love, forgiveness, and hope. Andrew Lloyd Webber's catchy tune

from the musical *Any Dream Will Do*, sent patrons from the theater with the melody in their ear, coloring their dreams, and for some, reviving their hopes of God's willingness to intervene in ordinary human life.

You may not be into Old Testament stories or showtunes, but instead appreciate the music and theology of the Grateful Dead.

Legend holds that the song, *Any Dream*, inspired Jerry Garcia to write *Ripple*, which also envisions a future directed by God. Dead Heads may recite or sing the song lyrics,

Reach out your hand if your cup be empty
If your cup is full, may it be again
Let it be known there is a fountain
That was not made by the hands of men.²

For all of the dissonance in their music, hope inspired Garcia, this same hope that rises from an eternal and divine source.

From the ancient's stories in the Book of Genesis to the New Testament of Matthew and into our time on stage and in rock concerts, we tell the stories of suppressed people who were

²So many legends abound of Garcia's inspiration, but he unquestionably writes of faith with a grace-filled theology infusing their songs.

<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=ripple+grateful+dead#wptab=s:H4slAAAAAAAAAONgVuLRT9c3LDYwMzMgKyI7xGjOLfDyxz1hKb1Ja05eY9Tg4grOyC93zSvJLkKukuJig7IEpPi4UDTy7GLS00INSyzNKYkvSUyyyk620s8tLc5M1i9KTc4vSsnMS49PziktLkktssqpLMpMLI7EyluUWVCQk6oA4QMAPmeBiYsAAAA>, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ripple_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ripple_(song))

down and out. We tell their stories and sing of those who trusted the dreams that pointed the way forward. In our remembering, we restore the hope that God is with us.

Back to our gospel lesson.

This is the first of three dreams Matthew conceives. When the angel calls Joseph “son of David,” we know that he is endowed with a royal blood line, from which the prophets claim salvation will come. The angel instructs him to take the risk of public shame, defy Jewish custom, accept Mary as his wife and the child she carries in her womb, rather than dismiss her for infidelity. Joseph will name the child Jesus, and by doing so claim him as his own.

Although Joseph’s life seemed to derail at Mary’s pregnancy, this dream reveals it as the genesis of God entering human life. Matthew takes the time to define for any reader that Emmanuel in Hebrew means “God is with us.” This same echoing message from the ancestors.

In the next chapter, beyond this morning’s text, the second dream sends Joseph and Mary into Egypt, to save this child from the murderous Herod. Joseph trusts he and Mary can survive in exile from his inheritance in the family tree’s DNA of ancestors who endured. The third dream, several years later, and after Herod’s death, advises him that it is safe to return, and settle in Nazareth.

Two short chapters is all Matthew writes of Joseph, But that is all we need.

In his small Syrian town, he wrote the counter narrative to the prevailing story of Roman rule and all their threats. Long after optimism dies, hope remains. Hope holds the seed of life and is where Matthew began.

He wrote of a determined dreamer and doer – Joseph. He wrote the story that compelled people to believe God chose to enter this fragile and beautiful human life to save them from sin. He wrote for us to believe that we possess the capacity to write another chapter of story that began long ago.

On this first Sunday of Advent, we light the candle of hope. Hope is the expectation that those things of faith; we can expect grace and eternal life are real despite any present circumstances. It is the certainty that God will make good on these divine promises.

Hope fuels us. In the ideas of theologian Jurgen Moltmann, hope causes us to act. It takes us not from rest but into unrest, not patience but impatience. Hope does not calm the unquiet heart but is itself the unquiet heart in us. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put us with reality as it is. They persist against all the lies, remember the ancient story of God with us, and are compelled to dream and do in this present age.³

³ Jurgen Moltmann *Theology of Hope*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 23.

The essence of this time of waiting and watching is to be ready for the way God turns the world around. Gather 'round all you dreamers, God is with us.



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