

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

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The Sermon Text — Matthew 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 fulfil 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.

SERMON

The opening seventeen verses in St. Matthew's gospel are a genealogy. They read like this: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez, the father of Hezron..." If you continue to read through these initial verses in Matthew with me because it actually gets better with names that dazzle such as Zerubbabel, Rheoboam, Jeshosaphat and Jechoniah. Someone has said that reading this section of Matthew is akin to reading the phone book. The cast of characters is impressive, but the plot is a bit thin.

What is the point of the genealogy and the section we read today? Just by mentioning these names Matthew helps his readers remember a number of Amazing Stories. He also leads them into another set of amazing stories. How amazing? First we learn that Jesus is the son of a virgin, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. We learn that he is one who bears the name of God, Emmanuel, God is with us. Jesus is the one who bears the power of God. He is the Son of God.

But, the genealogy suggests, Jesus is also the human son of Mary, adopted by Joseph. Joseph gave Jesus his family name, a family that traced its origin back to King David.

Next, the genealogy addressed the rumors that were being spread about the nature of Jesus. "How," people asked, "could the Messiah come from one whose origins were scandalous? This Jesus was born of an unwed mother?" Matthew answers by first telling something of the family of Jesus, a family that he traces back centuries.

If you, like me, grew up in rural America you know that people were intrigued with family. I would meet a man for the first time and he would say, "Who is your father?" I'd say, "Don White," and if he knew my dad he would nod approvingly. Don White was a quiet, responsible, get-it-done kind of a man. He was a cum laude graduate of Beloit college when a college education was rare in rural areas, a onetime editor of two small town newspapers, but then, by choice someone who worked as a milk-inspector, a job that didn't even require a high school diploma. One man said of my father, "He has an education, but you'd never know it." It was meant as a compliment. Translated the man said, *he's smart but he doesn't flaunt his education or put on airs.*

Matthew, like the folks in small town America, assumes that you know something about the son by learning about the father. Matthew tells us that Joseph, a religious, just man, a hard working carpenter and an observant Jew, came from a good family, a family we can trace back to David, Isaac and even Abraham.

Nearly forty years ago I officiated at a wedding for the third son in a family. At the reception Sally said to the mother, "What is it like to be the mother of the groom?" She said, "It isn't bad once you figure out your role. You just wear beige and keep your mouth shut."

If we can ignore the gender issue, the role of Joseph in the Christmas story resembles that mother. He is the silent man in beige. We have no quotations from Joseph. Unlike Mary he gave no stirring magnificates, and shared no lasting insights about God. In short, there is little remarkable about him except he is a remarkably faithful man who wanted to do the right thing. God is forever turning bit players such as Joseph into leading figures in the great drama of life. Note, you can have a major role even when you have no lines.

Engagement in the first century involved a formal marriage contract, usually signed by the fathers. The couple did not live together, but it was clearly understood that they would get married as soon as the period of engagement was over. So it was with Joseph, who discovered his bride-to-be was pregnant. Believing there was only one way to get pregnant, this just man resolved to quietly nullify the engagement documents in order not to shame his teen-age fiancée. He planned to slip away honorably. But an angel appeared and told him that Mary's pregnancy was special, a gift from God, and that the child would be called Jesus, or in Hebrew, Yeshua. He was handpicked by God to save us from our sins.

Joseph accepted the word of the angel. He stayed with Mary. Once again, he was a man determined to do the right thing. He donned beige and kept his mouth shut, because he was convinced this was of God.

Matthew's genealogy was different than most. It included women. Not just any women, but four controversial women in his all-male list. Rahab, for example, was a prostitute who aided the Jewish invasion of Jericho nearly 2,000 years earlier. Tamar seduced her father-in-law in a story where chutzpa produced justice. Bathsheba, the mother of King Solomon, committed adultery with King David, who arranged the death of her husband. Finally there was Ruth, a foreigner, a non-Jew, who became the grandmother of King David.

Without lecturing, Matthew reminds his readers that Jesus was not the first great figure who was surrounded in controversy. He tells people that none of us are born into totally pure circumstances. God is no blue nose, no puritanical snob, but rather the one who works with the famous and the infamous. God works his will through broken, sinful people like the women mentioned, and like Abraham, a coward, and David who was guilty of both adultery and arranging the death of his lover's husband. God works his will through famous prophets as well as prostitutes and virgins. His family includes everything from carpenters to kings, queens to hookers. Amazing Stories.

Of course this means that God can work through each of us. Each of us, regardless of how old we are or how much money we have, can be agents of God. God can use Joseph dressed in his coat of many colors as well as the quiet Joseph, a man surely dressed in beige. Each of us can be a channel through whom the grace of God flows.

What is the common denominator in all of this? Not wealth. Not gender. Not personality. Obedience. The willingness to bend our will to the will of God. The

willingness like Mary to say, "Let it be with me according to your word," or like Joseph who says nothing, and simply does the right and noble thing.

We serve our God by being faithful parents, honest employees, or caring employers. These are all great gifts we offer God, and he blesses them. He enters our lives, fills them and then sends us forth. In the words of the great Christmas hymn, "no ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in." This is our hope and our promise.

But let us be clear, this event is not primarily about us. This is God's story. This is the story of Jesus, the man the hymn writer calls, "love's pure light." It is a most surprising and amazing story. It is surprising in the manner of his birth. Jesus is the one who is of God, born of a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is amazing because he bears God's name -- Emmanuel, the God with us. He is the obedient one, whose very name tells us that he will save us from the threatening power of sin. He is the one whose birth baffled the wise and brought royalty to their knees.

Only incidentally is this story about the rest of us. When it is, however, it too is amazing. It surprises us with its cast of shady, all too human characters--male and female--who are included in the royal lineage. In God's great list of saints there is a whole battalion of rouges and sinners.

Two surprises remain in this story. The first takes place now. The great God of the universe does not sit aloof far above the earth, but comes to us incarnate, as human love and forgiveness. We are never alone. Jesus not only was the Immanuel, the God with us, he remains Immanuel.

A final surprise: This one is still unfolding comes at the end of time, when the final genealogy is read. For when the names are read it will include not only the famous and the infamous, but people like you and me, because the birth of Jesus means that by the grace of God, you and I have become a part of the family of God. Now, isn't that Amazing? Amen. © 2010