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Matthew 1:1-17

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THE RETURN OF THE KING

This is the season of Advent. It marks the beginning of the Church's liturgical year in which four weeks are set aside for Advent. During this season the church reflects upon God's promise to come to his people to save them; we prepare ourselves for the celebration of the nativity. Today, the second Sunday, we lit two candles on our Advent wreath. The candles symbolize the coming of light into this world of darkness. Now it so happens that today Jews are celebrating their own festival of lights, for today is the fifth day of Hanukkah. The Jews have their own liturgical calendar.

The Jewish liturgical year had its origins in the Exodus. So significant was the Exodus that God declared the month of that great event to be the first month of Israel's calendar (Exod 12:2). He ordained three festivals for them: Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread in the middle of the first month; the Festival of Weeks (*Shavuot*) in the third month, fifty days after Passover; and the Festival of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*) in the seventh month. Each of these festivals was associated with events in Israel's history: Passover marked the deliverance from slavery in Egypt into freedom; Weeks came to be associated with the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai; Tabernacles marked the wanderings in the wilderness. The liturgical year gave Israel the opportunity to relive its history each year, and to celebrate God, for the focus was on what God had done on behalf of his people Israel. Each festival was a memorial to God's intervention in history. Much later, two more festivals were added to the liturgical year; both celebrate God's miraculous intervention to save his people at a time of great crisis, when the very existence of the Jews was threatened. Purim in the twelfth month commemorates God's deliverance of the Jews from the evil plot of Haman in the days of Esther in 473 BC. Hanukkah in the ninth month commemorates God's deliverance of the Jews in 164 BC from the attempt of the ruler Antiochus to eradicate Judaism. All five festivals, then, celebrate God's intervention in the history of his people.

But we are not celebrating Hanukkah today; I did not light the candles on a *hanukiah*. Why not? Paul wrote to the Colossians, "do not let anyone judge you...with regard to a religious festival... These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Col 2:16-17). We are not celebrating Hanukkah today because we have a greater reality to celebrate, of which Hanukkah was a foreshadowing. Why then have I lit candles on the Advent wreath? The New Testament ordains no regular festivals other than the Lord's Supper, but within the first few centuries the church formulated a liturgical year. It did so for similar reasons to the liturgical year in the Old Testament: to relive history; and also for the reason given by Paul: "the reality...is found in Christ." The liturgical year provides a structure for remembering God's interventions in history in the person of Jesus Christ. It begins with Advent and proceeds through Christmas, Lent, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Day and Pentecost.

Christianity is not primarily a set of abstract beliefs nor a list of rules; it is an understanding of history. God's word is given not as a systematic theology nor as a set of wise sayings, but as a story, an expansive view of the history of this world from beginning to end. We have one primary belief: that Jesus is both Christ and Lord. We recognize that in the middle of time God has intervened in history in a decisive way, sending his Son as Savior, then exalting him as Lord at whose feet all shall bow. It is this that the liturgical year celebrates each year as we move from Advent to Pentecost. Even the earliest creeds are primarily statements about history; for example, the Apostles' Creed, based on a second-century Roman baptismal creed: "I believe...in Jesus Christ...who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried;...the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven..." These are statements about history.

For the past seven or so years we have been a little more deliberate in paying attention to the calendar. We do so not to engage in mere ritual, but to remind ourselves of this history, to remind ourselves of what God was doing in Jesus the Christ, to place ourselves into that story. So we will pay attention to Advent for these next three Sundays.

Two of the gospels contain birth narratives about Jesus: Matthew and Luke. They are very different accounts, though complementary rather than contradictory. Several times we have looked at Luke's account, but we have neglected Matthew's. This year we'll rectify that: in these three remaining Sundays of Advent we'll look at most of Matthew's birth narrative of Jesus in the first two chapters of his gospel. This account falls easily into four sections (1:1-17, 18-25; 2:1-12, 13-23). I have the first section.

If you open your Bible to the beginning of Matthew, you'll notice that it starts with a genealogy. This is not a promising way to begin a book, much less the entire New Testament. Our natural tendency is to fast forward over this to get to the good stuff. Not all cultures treat Biblical genealogies this way, as Joanne Shetler relates in her book, *And the Word Came with Power*. She was a Wycliffe Bible translator in a tribal village in the Philippines. Though the village headman treated her like his own daughter, and she called him Ama, "father," he showed no interest in the gospel. She writes:

I was still eating most of my meals at Ama's house, bombarding him with the gospel—explaining, reasoning, and giving examples. He endured patiently, but didn't respond...

Then one day Ama casually picked up an English New Testament from my...desk. He opened it to the first page, Matthew 1, which is a list of names. He stood frozen, staring at it. Incredulous, he asked me, "You mean this has a genealogy in it?"

I said, "Yeah, but just skip over that so you can get to the good part." "You mean this is true?" he asked. Eyes riveted to the page, he struggled through the list of names.

Something's going on here! I got out some shelf paper and made a genealogy from Adam to Jesus, from the ceiling clear down to the floor. Ama took it all over the village. He carefully explained, "We always thought it was the rock and the banana plant that gave birth to people. But we don't have their names written down. Look, here are ALL the names—written down."¹

Joanne writes that the people "loved that genealogy from the Gospel of Matthew." They loved it because it placed them into the story of the world. This is why Matthew places the genealogy here at the beginning of his gospel about Jesus: to place Jesus into the story of his people. His title reads:

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham: (Matt 1:1 TNIV)

Matthew considered it vital that his readers see Jesus as the son of David and the son of Abraham, that they place him within the broader story of David and Abraham. If we are to understand Jesus we need to understand the stories of those two men. Matthew then presents a stylized genealogy, structured into three periods of fourteen generations, demarcated by significant events in Israel's history. He concludes his genealogy:

Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah. (1:17)

To Abraham and David he adds the exile of Israel to Babylon as the third defining moment in Israel's history into which Jesus is born. To understand Jesus, then, we need to understand these three moments: Abraham, David and exile.

Abraham

Abraham was God's answer to human sin. The human project quickly went wrong when Adam and Eve sinned against the Lord in the garden of Eden. God responded in judgment and grace: in judgment by cursing the serpent and the land, inflicting pain upon the man and woman, and expelling them from the garden; in grace by imposing enmity between the woman and the serpent and between their respective seeds, by providing coverings, and by ensuring the continuation of life. In the next eight chapters (Gen 4:1–11:26) humanity goes from bad to worse; wandering east of Eden, humanity sinks ever deeper into sin. Each time God responds in judgment but also in grace. Cain kills Abel, God curses Cain, consigning his line to a dead-end, but graciously gives Eve a replacement son, Seth. The sons of God see that the daughters of men are good and take them; God, seeing that this is evil, wipes the earth clean with the Flood, but graciously preserves Noah and commissions him as a new Adam, while making a covenant to never again wipe the earth clean even although mankind is still desperately wicked. Humanity gathers together to build a mighty tower, and God responds by confusing human language and scattering humanity across the earth.

These chapters drive home two fundamental truths: the inability of humanity to find its own way back to the garden, and the repeated intrusion of divine grace to keep the world going even in the face of human wickedness. Left to its own devices humanity does not pull itself up by its own bootstraps, but sinks deeper into sin. You have only to look at the history of the last hundred years to see the appalling things of which mankind is capable. But there are limits beyond which God will not allow evil to multiply. His grace is evident even in his judgment, for he intercedes in judgment to limit the spread of evil.

By the end of chapter 11 it has become absolutely clear that mankind cannot save itself. The continued existence of mankind and even the earth is due entirely to divine grace. The only hope is for God to intervene. This is what he did with Abraham. He called an old man, an idolatrous moon-worshiper, to leave the east and head west:

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Gen 12:1-3)

God presented his plan in a seven-line statement of intent, in which the words "bless" and "blessing" figure prominently. God would restore blessing to the world and to the humans he had made. He chose Abraham to be not only the recipient of this blessing, but also the conduit through which blessing would reach all peoples. This blessing had two major components: a seed and a land. God solemnized this two-fold promise with a covenant, binding himself in oath to Abraham. God overcame the barrenness of Abraham and Sarah to give them a seed, a son, from whom he built a mighty people. Centuries later God delivered these children of Abraham out of slavery in Egypt into freedom. He brought them to himself and he led them into the promised land. Here God put his presence in the midst of his people: God and his people together just as in the garden of Eden. God redeemed Israel to be the new humanity. It is this history that is celebrated in our responsive reading today, Psalm 136.

David

Here in the land God gave his people a king to lead them in righteousness and justice. In Jerusalem were enthroned two kings: God, the heavenly king, and David, his earthly representative. God entered into a covenant with David, promising him a son:

"I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son." (2 Sam 7:12-14)

It initially seemed that Solomon would be this promised son. He built a temple which God filled with his glory, placing his presence in the midst of his people. All seemed well for Israel, the children of Abraham, with Solomon, the son of David, as their king and God in their midst. Israel was a colony of heaven on earth.

Exile

But quickly it all fell apart. "King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women" (1 Kgs 11:1). It is stunning how quickly everything went wrong. Within just a few verses God tore apart the kingdom of his people. But still he was faithful to his covenant with David by keeping a line of kings on the throne in Jerusalem. But, with a couple of exceptions, these kings, these Davidic sons, led the children of Abraham in the wrong direction. Eventually God withdrew his presence from the temple and sent his people into exile in Babylon. He

expelled his people from his sanctuary, just as he had expelled Adam and Eve. Was the whole redemptive program over?

But still God remained faithful to his covenants. He promised that he would come and save his people. There were glimmers of hope. God did open up the way for his people to return home after Persia conquered Babylon, but only a minority did so. He did provide for the temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem under Zerubbabel, but it was a pale shadow of Solomon's magnificent temple. One of the brightest glimmers of hope came in the second century BC, when Judea was a backwater district in the vast Seleucid empire. The ruler of that empire, Antiochus IV, tried to eradicate Judaism; he prohibited those things which marked the Jews out as God's people—Sabbath-observance, circumcision, Torah—and desecrated the temple by sacrificing on its altar and erecting a statue of Zeus. For one priest and his family this was too much. They rose up in rebellion, launching the Maccabean Revolt. Amazingly, after three years they regained the temple and re-dedicated it to the Lord. This is what Hanukkah celebrates, for *hanukkah* means dedication. The Jews were united in this effort; it all seemed so full of divine favor, so full of promise. But again things went wrong.

The Maccabees kept fighting and eventually gained independence for Israel. But this priestly family which had led the revolt arrogated to itself the offices of both high priest and king, though it was genealogically qualified for neither. This Hasmonian line of priest-kings corrupted itself with power. For 80 years Israel was an independent nation; its territory was almost as expansive as that under David and Solomon. Israel again had a line of kings, but they were not true kings, for they were not from the line of David. The unity of the Jews fractured, as the people split into different factions based upon their response to the Hasmonians. The Pharisees retreated into Torah, the Essenes retreated to the desert, and the Sadducees enjoyed their power. Both the Pharisees and the Essenes prepared themselves for God to come to his people. The Sadducees didn't particularly want him to come; they were doing very well, thank you.

So even Hanukkah would evoke a mixed feeling among the Jews. Yes, it is a celebration of God's miraculous deliverance of his people, but it would also evoke wistful remembrance of dashed hopes and failed expectations.

Israel's independence lasted until 63 BC, when infighting between the Jews became so extreme that Rome took Jerusalem and imposed peace. Now at the end of the first century BC the Jews again had a king. It was bad enough that the Hasmonian kings were not of the line of David, but at least they were of Israel. Herod the Great was not even a Jew, but of mixed Idumean and Nabatean descent. He had ingratiated himself with the Romans, and won appointment as king of the Jews, though not himself a Jew. He bolstered his claim by marrying into the line of Hasmonian priest-kings. A man of grandiose building plans and a need to curry favor among the Jews, he embarked on building a series of magnificent buildings, some of which still stand today. Prominent among these was the temple in Jerusalem; when finished this was one of the most magnificent buildings in the whole world. It was built by the king, as implied by the Davidic covenant, but it was built by the wrong person, by an imposter.

Matthew's genealogy of Jesus reminds Israel of its history. A Jew would read this genealogy with very mixed emotions. The fourteen generations from Abraham to David were a time of growing fulfillment as God worked through Isaac, Jacob, Judah and Boaz. Israel could read that portion of its history with a sense of joy and honor.

The fourteen generations from David to the Exile were a time of growing doom, the occasional bright spots of Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah only serving to highlight the failures of Solomon, Rehoboam and Manasseh. Israel would read this portion with a sense of disappointment and shame. Finally the fourteen generations from the exile, filled with names unfamiliar to us, were a time of hope deferred. The festivals of Purim and Hanukkah had been added to their calendar during this time. They had a king but he was an imposter. They had a temple but its builder was this imposter king. It had been nearly 600 years since Israel had had a true Davidic king. Wasn't it about time that God came to save his people, as promised?

This, then, is Israel's story, a story nearly two millennia old. It is into this story that Matthew announces the birth of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham, as the fourth epochal event of its history. God has remained faithful to his covenants with Abraham and David. He has been faithful to his covenant with Abraham by bringing forth another son of Abraham. He has been faithful to his covenant with David by bringing forth another son of David. Matthew announces the long-awaited return of their king. This raises the expectation that God will realize the promise of his covenant with Abraham to restore blessing to the earth, that he will realize the promise of his covenant with David by raising up a ruler who will lead his people in righteousness and justice and will build a temple for God's name, and that he will finally end the exile of his people. The Jews understood that they had gone into exile because they had broken covenant. But through it all God had remained faithful to his covenant. Israel expressed its confidence in the refrain of the two psalms we read today: "Give thanks to the LORD for he is good, his love endures for ever" (Ps 118, 136). That love is *hesed*, love that is loyal to covenant. This refrain was a bedrock of Israel's faith.

There are some surprising twists to this genealogy. At the end, Jesus, this returning king, is defined in relation not to his father Joseph but to his mother Mary. This Mary is not the first woman named in the genealogy, but the fifth. She has been preceded by Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Uriah's wife. Each of these women has a significant place in Israel's history even though none is a native Israelite. Each is a witness to the loyal-love of God when, in one way or another, the future of God's people was threatened by the unfaithfulness of his people. Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law; he was disloyal to his responsibilities to her by withholding his youngest son from her after the death of her first two husbands, who were his first two sons. But Tamar was loyal, getting Judah to lie with her in order to continue the family line. Judah had to admit that she was righteous not he (Gen 38). Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute living in Jericho. She had heard what God had done in bringing his people out of Egypt, and had responded in faith. She hid the two Israelite spies in her house and enabled them to escape from Jericho (Josh 2). Technically she should have been put to death as a Canaanite; she was subject to the ban of utter destruction. But she was spared the utter destruction brought upon Jericho, and incorporated into Israel because of her faith, her response to God's great acts. She is to be contrasted with Achan who disobeyed God by taking some of the booty from Jericho. He suffered the fate from which Rahab was spared; he was destroyed (Josh 7). Ruth's in-laws had left Israel during a famine. This famine implied a lack of faithfulness by Israel, and this family's departure from the land implied a further lack of faithfulness as they went into voluntary exile. But Ruth joined herself to Israel in faith, and from her was born ultimately David. Uriah's wife was Bathsheba with whom David committed adultery and whose husband

was killed on David's orders. Now David was the king, supposed to lead the people in righteousness and justice, but he committed two heinous sins.

Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Uriah (and presumably his wife also) were all Gentiles. In each case their faithfulness showed up the unfaithfulness of an Israelite: Judah, Achan, Elimelek and his sons, and David. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Uriah's wife were all women, here highlighted in the Messiah's genealogy. What remarkable condescension on the part of God to allow the promised seed to be continued by Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Uriah's wife. What a testimony to the loyal love of God in the face of human disobedience.

The genealogy now closes with a fifth woman, Mary. The next section shows that the whiff of scandal surrounds this birth as it has the births to the other women, for Mary was not yet married. But all Israel had to acknowledge that God had already overcome the sinfulness of his people in continuing the line through scandalous relationships. They could not object to what he was now doing in bringing forth the Messiah from an unwed virgin woman. It's another testimony to the faithfulness of God.

For those who have ears to hear, then, this genealogy bears witness to the twin realities of human sinfulness and divine faithfulness. But it is divine faithfulness that trumps human sinfulness. God remains faithful to his covenant, no matter what. The success of his plans depends not upon us but upon his righteousness. So you see that a genealogy can be a lot more promising than first meets the eye.

We observe Advent in order to place ourselves into the story of Jesus. We read this genealogy to place Jesus into the larger story of Israel, of which we become the beneficiaries, brought in through faith as the children of Abraham, made the people of God, with the son of David as our king, for the king has returned.

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.*

1. Joanne Shetler with Patricia Purvis, *And the Word Came With Power* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah, 1992), 81.

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