

A NEW SHOOT FROM A DEAD TREE



Matthew 1–2

First Message

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SERIES: NEW BEGINNINGS

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and so we have lit the first of our Advent candles. Today marks the beginning of a new year in the Church Year, the liturgical calendar whereby the church universal shapes its life and worship around the Lord Jesus Christ. The year begins not with the Nativity, the birth of Jesus, but with a four-week season of anticipation of that birth. It is a season of longing and hope. We look back and recall Israel's longing that God would come to his people to save them. But we also look forward in our own longing and hope that the same Jesus who came will come again to complete what has been started.

There are four Sundays of Advent. We also have four gospels, four different accounts of the life of Jesus. The early church considered it important to preserve this fourfold gospel rather than harmonize the four into one. But we merge the gospels in our nativity creches: Matthew's star above the stable of popular imagination; Luke's shepherds alongside Matthew's magi; and the ox and ass from Isaiah—all assembled together.

The four gospels end in a similar way, with an extended Passion narrative resulting in the death of Jesus, followed by resurrection. For Matthew, Mark and Luke the middle is broadly similar: ministry in Galilee followed by a journey to Jerusalem. But the four gospels have four quite different beginnings.

For these four weeks of Advent we are going to look at these four beginnings: Matthew, John (Eugene), Luke (Brian) and Mark (Shawn). We'll look at how these four gospels begin their story of Jesus. So, this a series on Advent beginnings.

How do you begin a story? Maria told us: "Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start." But where is the beginning? I can tell my own story in quite different ways. I can start my story from different beginning points. I might start with when I came to the US nearly 37 years ago, or, more likely, go a few years further back to what I studied at university and grad school, to explain why I came to this country. Or I could go back to when and where I was born, followed by growing up in Thailand, Malaysia and England. Or, if I want to explain why I consider Edinburgh to be my home even though I've lived there only about three years in several small periods, I would go back 200 years to when my great-times-four grandfather moved 8 miles from one side of Edinburgh to the other side. Different ways of beginning my story, but it's all the same story.

How do you begin the story of Jesus? Each of the four evangelists is intentional about starting from the beginning in telling the story of Jesus. But they start from very different beginnings.

Mark was the first gospel written. It starts "The *beginning* of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1 ESV). Mark is in such a hurry to proclaim this gospel or good news that he skips the birth of Jesus and begins immediately with John the Baptist, preparing the way of the Lord. Within just a few verses Jesus is baptized, tested in the wilderness, and begins his own ministry, "proclaiming the gospel of God" (1:14). Nevertheless, despite this breathless beginning, Mark anchors his story in Israel's Scriptures, in the prophets Malachi and

Isaiah.

Matthew begins with a genealogy: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham" (1:1). He, too, anchors the story of Jesus in Israel's story, going all the way back to Father Abraham.

Luke begins by telling us how he wrote his gospel. Inspired by other accounts based upon the things "handed down to us by those who *from the beginning* were eyewitnesses," he himself has now "investigated everything carefully *from the beginning*" to write his own orderly account (1:1-4 NASB). He then begins his story of Jesus within living memory, skillfully interweaving the births of John and Jesus together with the annunciations of these two births. Luke, also, anchors this in Israel's Scriptures: chapters 1-2 are resonant with the OT.

Finally, John is audacious in his opening: "*In the beginning* was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was *in the beginning* with God" (1:1-2). "In the beginning": the very words which began the story of the entire cosmos in Genesis 1, the words which begin the whole Bible, now begin John's story of Jesus.

So, four very different beginnings to the story of Jesus, yet each claiming to start in the beginning. And each firmly anchored into a story that is already underway, a story that has been underway for a long time: the story of Israel, or, in John's case, the story of Israel placed within the larger story of the whole world. Today we focus on how Matthew takes the existing story of Israel, a story which has gotten stuck, and shows how God breathes new life into it through Jesus. We look at Matthew's new beginning of an old, old story.

What's in a name? We've all been wearing name badges so we can identify each other behind our face masks—also to hide the embarrassing fact that though we've seen one another for years we still don't know each other's names, and that some of us are now an age where we're forgetting names. When we meet a new person, we want to identify and place them. So we ask a series of questions: Who are you? Where are you from? What do you do?

In beginning of his story of Jesus, Matthew answers four such questions: who, how, where and whence:

Who? He is "Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham" (1:1).

How? "From the Holy Spirit" (1:18, 20).

Where? "In Bethlehem of Judea" (2:5).

Whence? From Egypt to Nazareth (2:15, 23).

The answers to these four questions not only identify Jesus, but place him firmly into Israel's story.

I. Who (1:1-17)

Matthew begins his story of Jesus with a genealogy:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (Matt 1:1 ESV)

This is immediately off-putting. Genealogies are boring: an end-

less list of names that are hard to pronounce. We want to hit the fast-forward button and move to the next section. But this genealogy is important, because Matthew is providing the context for the birth of Jesus.

Matthew presents a stylized genealogy, structured in three stages around four key events:

So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations. (1:17)

How do you picture your own storyline? Is it a J-curve: a drop followed by a dramatic rise that takes you far beyond the starting point, up into the heights? Or is it a reverse J-curve: a rise followed by a long decline into insignificance, early promise turned to disillusion? Is it a stagnating flat-line: a story that is going nowhere? Is there trauma that dramatically changes the storyline and continues to haunt it? Israel's storyline contains many of these features.

The history of Israel can be simply described, and its storyline charted, in these three stages, around these four key events or people: Abraham, David, deportation to Babylon, and Jesus.

Israel's story began with God's call of Abraham in Genesis 12, promising him a seed: both a son and a great nation, through whom God would in turn extend blessing to all the families of the earth. The rest of the Bible is the story of the fulfillment of this promise. The storyline from Abraham to David was generally upward. Here are some illustrious names: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Judah, Boaz and finally David. Here are also some surprising names: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Four women in a genealogy full of men. Four women through whom God advanced Israel's storyline. Four women who were foreigners, incorporated into Israel and its story.

The second stage also begins with the promise of a son. God promised King David a son who would build a temple for God's dwelling (2 Sam 7). David had such a son, Solomon, who did build the Lord a temple in which he dwelt among his people. Solomon's prayer of dedication and the entrance of the Lord's glory into the temple (1 Kings 8) is the highpoint of the OT, the highpoint of Israel's story. Alas, the storyline quickly turned downwards. The names in this second section are of the kings of Judah. On many of them the OT Book of Kings renders the verdict, "He did evil in the sight of the Lord." Israel went downhill until it suffered the catastrophe of divine judgment: God removed his presence, the temple was destroyed, and the people deported to Babylon, exiled from the land of promise.

The trauma of these events rippled intergenerationally through the next six centuries. Most of the names here are unfamiliar, because we're past the close of the OT. God had ceased to speak to his people. Israel's story-line was flat, stagnant, going nowhere. Israel's story was stuck. But amidst the trauma, there were faithful Israelites who maintained hope, based upon God's character and upon promises he had made through his prophets, that he would come to save his people.

Matthew ends his genealogy with a twist. After reading "the father of" 39 times, after 39 "begat"s (KJV), when we reach Joseph we expect to read "Joseph the father of Jesus." Instead we read "Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ" (1:16). The genealogy ends with a fifth woman, who is the birth parent of Jesus the Messiah. Joseph is not credited with being a birth

parent. The way Matthew has constructed the genealogy leads us to expect that Jesus will fulfill the expectation of the son of Abraham and the son of David, and that he will heal the enduring trauma of the Babylonian captivity. He will unstick Israel's story and move it forward.

But how can this be? After all this failure, how can there be a person who unsticks the story and moves it forward?

2. How (1:18-25)

The second section addresses this question of *How*?

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. (1:18)

The actual birth of Jesus is mentioned obliquely in v. 25: Mary gave birth to a son. That is an answer to the "how" question, but it's not the "how" question that Matthew is interested in. He pays much more attention not to the "how" of Jesus's birth but to the "how" of his conception. When Mary was betrothed to Joseph, a status more solemn and binding than engagement today, she was found to be pregnant. This was grounds for divorce. But we, the readers, are told by Matthew, and Joseph is told by the angel in a dream, that the conception is "from the Holy Spirit" (1:18, 20). Therefore Joseph should not be afraid to marry.

Though Joseph has no part in the conception of the child, he is to name him: "you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (1:21). Jesus is the Hebrew name Yeshua, meaning Yahweh saves, the Lord saves. God's people were longing that the Lord would save them; they had been praying this for centuries. At this moment in time they were longing that he would save them from their Roman oppressors. But this Jesus will save them from their sins. The Jews weren't looking for a savior to do that! They had a system for dealing with sins: a temple, sacrifices and priests to atone for sins. But that system had not worked. It wasn't the Romans that were preventing the Jews from flourishing, from achieving the promise within God's covenants with Abraham and with David. It wasn't the Romans who stuck Israel's storyline. Rome was not the problem. Human sin was the problem. It was because of Israel's unfaithfulness and breach of covenant that the great trauma of the deportation to Babylon had happened.

This miraculous conception "from the Holy Spirit" fulfills the Scriptures: in the birth of Jesus God will once again be present with his people. In naming the child, Joseph is included in the wonder of this Presence, of Immanuel, God with us.

3. Where (2:1-12)

The third question Matthew answers is where was Jesus born? "In Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king" (2:1). But why Bethlehem? The obvious place for the son of David, the Messiah, to be born was Jerusalem in the king's palace. And so it was to Jerusalem that magi from the east came, having seen a star. The magi were not kings, they were not three in number, and their names were not Melchior, Balthazar and Gaspar. These are later inventions. They were learned men, so "wise men" is an appropriate translation. They examined the heavens and practiced what we consider today the contradictory disciplines of astronomy and astrology. The star they saw prompted them to seek one born king of the Jews in order to worship him. To Jerusalem they came, expecting to find him there. They did find a king, but not the one they were looking for. Herod the Great had been king of the Jews for 35 years. He was a magnificent builder; some of his work survives even today. Among his

buildings were the temple in Jerusalem. But he was not a descendant of David. He wasn't even a Jew, so he couldn't be the temple-builder of the Davidic covenant.

Herod was a paranoid ruler. It is therefore not surprising that he was troubled by the appearance of the magi. All Jerusalem was troubled with him, for a troubled Herod meant trouble! Herod summoned the religious leaders, who told him that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, as told in Micah 5:2. Earlier Micah had announced the destruction of Jerusalem because of Israel's sin (Mic 3:12). In bringing forth a new ruler, God would go back before Jerusalem to Bethlehem. The son of David would be born in David's birthplace. God would go back to the rootstock of David.

The magi went the short distance to Bethlehem, guided by the star. They fell down and worshiped baby Jesus, offering him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Here are Gentile nobles rendering tribute and worship to the son of David, in fulfillment of Psalm 72, a psalm about Solomon, the son of David, now being realized in the one greater than Solomon, the true son of David.

4. Whence (2:13-23)

Though Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, he did not stay there long. He grew up in Nazareth in Galilee. Whence came he to Nazareth? Where did he come from to end up in Nazareth? This is the fourth question addressed by Matthew. He came from Egypt to Nazareth, again in fulfillment of the Scriptures. There are three short scenes, each ending with the fulfillment of the Scriptures.

4.1 The Flight to Egypt (2:13-15)

Warned in another dream about Herod's murderous intent, Joseph was told to flee to Egypt with child and mother, remaining there till Herod died. Why Egypt? Egypt was the place where Jacob and his sons went in order to be preserved during a great famine. They were 70 in number, Israel *in nuce*, in embryonic form. They would come out of Egypt having been built into a great nation. Now a new Israel *in nuce* is preserved in Egypt, then brought out.

Thus would be fulfilled another Scripture, "Out of Egypt I called my son," found in Hosea:

**When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son. (Hos 11:1)**

The context is the Lord's exasperation with his people on whom he has showered such great love. Love which they returned as faithlessness. The next verse reads:

**The more they were called,
the more they went away. (11:2).**

Even as an infant Jesus was repeating Israel's history, but with a major difference. He would not exasperate his father; he would not turn away. He would be faithful where Israel had been faithless.

4.2 The Massacre of the Innocents (2:16-18)

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, when Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the magi, he flew into a rage and ordered the massacre of all the baby boys in Bethlehem. This was quite in character for Herod, who was so paranoid that he killed numerous close relatives, including his favorite wife and at least two sons. But Herod was also repeating earlier history: Pharaoh's attempt to destroy the male line in Egypt, and Athaliah's attempt to destroy the royal line in Judah. All were attempts by the powers of evil to destroy the long-

promised seed. And the distraught mothers were also repeating earlier history, fulfilling what was spoken by Jeremiah (Jer 31:15), where Rachel mourned her offspring being carried into exile. This verse comes just a few verses before the promise of a new covenant (31:31-34). The Lord heard the grieving and would remember his people. Now he hears the grieving in Bethlehem and will remember his people. There is hope for the future.

4.3 The Return to Nazareth (2:19-23)

In a third dream, the angel of the Lord told Joseph that it was safe to return home. But where was home? It was not Bethlehem. Instead, Joseph's return is described in three stages of increasing specificity: first to Israel, then to Galilee, and finally to Nazareth.

Herod the Great was dead by now, but he had been succeeded by a ruler who was no better. Herod died in 4 BC and his kingdom was divided between three sons. Herod Archelaus ruled over Judea and Samaria as ethnarch, but was not named King of the Jews, the title which he coveted. He proved such a bad ruler that ten years later Rome banished him to distant Gaul, and instituted direct rule through a prefect. Well might Joseph be afraid.

Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee as tetrarch, and it was to his territory that Joseph brought his family. This is the Herod we encounter in the rest of the gospel.

Joseph brought his family to live "in a city called Nazareth." This too was in fulfillment of prophets, "He shall be called a Nazarene." This is problematic, for this quotation is not found anywhere in the Scriptures. Nazareth is not mentioned in the OT. For good reason: the settlement didn't even exist in OT times. Describing it as a "city" is very generous of the ESV. Even "town" used by most other English versions is generous. Today Nazareth is a major city, but in the first century it was a small village of less than 500.

What is the connection between Nazareth and Nazarene? Here, Nazarene does not mean that Jesus was from Nazareth, nor that he was a Nazirite—John the Baptist was a Nazirite from the womb, but not Jesus; his conduct during his public ministry broke every Nazirite vow! Most probably, Matthew is drawing a connection based on the word that lies at the root of both Nazareth and Nazarene, the Hebrew word *netser*, meaning "shoot." As Isaiah foretold in our Scripture reading:

**There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch (*netser*) from his roots shall bear fruit.**

(Isa 11:1)

The Davidic line had become dead. There had not been a Davidic king on the throne of David for six centuries. There had been kings, but they did not have the right pedigree: they were not of the line of David. Now the people once again had a king, Herod, King of the Jews, but he wasn't even properly Jewish. The storyline of Israel was stuck. As foretold through Isaiah, the Lord was abandoning the rotten tree, and going back to the rootstock, the stump of Jesse. A *netser* is a shoot that comes out of the rootstock. Jesus is this *netser*, and he shall be fruitful.

In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious. (Isa 11:10)

Jesus was born into Israel's story. In the next two chapters he continued to identify with Israel's story: in baptism and in the temptation in the wilderness. Jesus recapitulated Israel's story. He emerged from the wilderness as one commissioned, tested and

proven faithful. He was ready to begin his public ministry, to announce the good news of the kingdom of heaven. He would be the faithful and obedient servant of the Lord. He would not repeat the sins of Israel. He would be faithful Israel.

With the birth of Jesus, Matthew shows how God is restarting the story of Israel. The story that had been stuck for centuries. A story filled with trauma, trauma that had lingered for 600 years. The ministry of Jesus would be fruitful.

We all have different stories. They begin in different places in time and space. The timelines look different: a J-curve, an upside down J-curve, a flat-line. Our stories may contain significant trauma. Whatever our story and timeline, we are called to come to Jesus and enter into his story. Healing comes when we allow our story to intersect with the story of Jesus. There is no story so broken, so stuck, so filled with trauma, that it cannot be healed by intersection with the story of Jesus.

The apostle Paul uses a number of words to describe our participation in the Jesus story. When we come to Christ we are co-crucified with him, we co-die and are co-buried with him. But then we are made alive and co-raised with him to co-live with him. We are being co-formed into him. When he returns we shall be co-glorified, co-seated and co-reign together with him. We are united with Christ in the past in death and burial. We are united with Christ in the present in resurrection life. We will be united with Christ in the future in glorification and being seated in God's presence.

Most of us are Gentiles who are grafted into Israel's story which has its start in the call of Abraham. Gathered into Christ, the son of Abraham, we are the children of Abraham, heirs of the promise. We give our allegiance, loyalty and devotion to our King, the son of David. United together in Christ we are brothers and sisters together

in God's great story of redeeming a people for his presence through his beloved Son. We are the temple in whom he dwells. We each are building blocks, being fitted together on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone, to be a fit dwelling place for God. We are knit together by his Spirit at work in us, who is forming us into the likeness of Christ.

We have two great symbols of our union with Christ. The first is baptism. We had a church baptism last Sunday in which several people publicly identified themselves with the Jesus story. They went down into the waters, dying to self, and rose to newness of life in Christ.

The second symbol is communion, the Lord's Supper. We've celebrated the Lord's Supper each week throughout the Fall, and will continue to do so through Advent. We remind ourselves on a regular basis that the Lord gave himself for us, dying in our place. We eat the bread and drink the cup, reminding ourselves of the Lord Jesus and our participation in his story.

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

(Collect for the First Sunday of Advent)

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