



Catalog No. 7327

Matthew 1:1–2:23

First Message

Bernard Bell

December 7, 2014

THE SAVIOR PROMISED LONG

SERIES: ADVENT 2014

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

This is the Collect for today, the Second Sunday of Advent, from the *Book of Common Prayer*.¹ As is our custom we will devote the next three Sundays to a short Advent series. Our focus this year is the different accounts of the incarnation as related by the evangelists, the gospel writers. Each gospel writer begins in the beginning, but each begins at a different place. Mark begins in “The beginning,” but his beginning is the ministry of John the Baptist, some three decades after the birth of John and his cousin Jesus. Matthew begins with the discovery of Mary’s pregnancy, though prefixed with a genealogy that goes back to Abraham. Luke begins a few months earlier with the annunciation to old Zechariah that his barren and equally-old wife, Elizabeth, would conceive and bear a son, John the Baptist. John, like Mark, begins “In the beginning,” but his beginning is the timelessness before the beginning.

In these next three weeks we will look at the accounts of Matthew, John and Luke, seeking to allow the three writers to retain their distinct perspectives. Our nativity scenes, or crèches, jumble the accounts together: Matthew’s star hangs over the stable of popular imagination. Inside are Luke’s babe in the manger, and the ox and ass from Isaiah. Gathered outside are Luke’s shepherds and Matthew’s wise men. Matthew and Luke give very different accounts of the birth of Jesus. They are not contradictory. Rather, each account serves the broader purposes of its writer.

Matthew begins his gospel,

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

What’s in a name? When we meet a new person, whether at a cocktail party, or during community hour here at PBCC, we want to identify and place them. So we ask a series of questions: Who are you? What do you do? Where are you from? In his first two chapters Matthew gives answers to four such questions: who, how, where, whence:

- *Who* is this one of whom he writes? He is “Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham” (1:1).
- *How* did he come to be? “From the Holy Spirit” (1:18, 20).
- *Where* was he born? “In Bethlehem of Judea” (2:5).
- *From where* did he come? From Egypt to Nazareth (2:15, 23).

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

I. Who (1:1-17)

Matthew’s opening verse sends us back to the Old Testament with its many genealogies. Most of us find the Biblical genealogies boring, so we skip over them. A genealogy is important for it establishes pedigree, legitimacy and inheritance.

The leader of ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) understands this. In June he announced that the caliphate had been restored after ninety years, and called on all Muslims to acknowledge him as Caliph Ibrahim, the head of Dar al-Islam, the world of Islam. The early history of this man is rather murky, and there are conflicting reports as to his real identity. But he has adopted an identity, expressed in the names he took, names which claim a pedigree and establish his legitimacy. He is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Husseini al-Qurashi:

- *Abu Bakr*: the name of the first caliph (Arabic, “successor”), a close associate of Muhammad, and one of the very first Muslims—those who submit to Allah and his prophet Muhammad.
- *al-Baghdadi*: of Baghdad.
- *al-Qurashi*: of the Quraysh tribe into which Muhammad was born.

Abu Bakr understands the significance of titles and pedigree. So does Matthew, when he announces the subject of his book: Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. To understand this Jesus we must accept him as son of David, son of Abraham. Matthew then gives his genealogy from Abraham through David to Jesus, following the standard Jewish order from past to present. By contrast, Luke presents his genealogy of Jesus in the usual Greco-Roman order from the present to the past.

Matthew presents a stylized genealogy, structured 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)

The number fourteen is significant, for it is the number of the name David, further enhancing Jesus’ pedigree as the son of David.

God’s purposes for Israel began with his call of Abraham, promising him a seed—both a son and a great nation. But God’s purposes were not restricted to Abraham and his physical seed, for in him would all the families of the earth be blessed:

“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen 12:2-3)

The rest of the Bible is the fulfilment of this statement.

God's purposes for Israel were further defined when he made a covenant with David to provide him a son:

“I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.” (2 Sam 7:12-14)

God's promises to these two individuals both concern a son: Abraham and son, David and son.

The history of Israel can be simply described as three stages: from Abraham on the fortunes of God's people grew, reaching a climax with David and his son. Thereafter they declined, until Israel was deported from the land into which Abraham had entered. It looked as if Israel had come to nothing; its fortunes had been a flat line ever since. But with his genealogy Matthew makes an important announcement: a fourth pivotal moment has come; the Christ has arrived. As son of David and son of Abraham, he is the true locus of God's promises to those figures of old. He will end the flat-line state under which God's people have languished since the deportation.

There's more to the genealogy, including some surprises: like most genealogies, this one has some skeletons in the closet. Four women are named: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Uriah's wife. With three of them there is sexual irregularity. Furthermore at least three are Gentiles, incorporated into Christ's lineage, forerunners of other Gentiles who will be gathered in to his people.

The incorporation of these women prepares the genealogy to end with a fifth woman: “Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ” (1:16). Joseph is the legal father of Jesus, as established by the genealogy, but it is Mary who is the birth parent.

2. How (1:18-25)

The second section addresses the question of “How?”

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

The actual birth of Jesus is covered obliquely in a few words in v. 25. Matthew is much more interested in the conception of Jesus, for it is unexpected and seems scandalous. 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. We, the readers, are told by Matthew, and Joseph is told by the angel, 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, thus establishing legal paternity: “you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (1:21). Jesus, or its Hebrew form Joshua or Jehoshua, means Yahweh saves, the Lord saves. It was a fairly common name in the first century, expressing Jewish longings that God would save his people from Roman oppression. This Jesus will save his people, not from Rome but from their sins. The Jews weren't looking for a savior to do that! They had a temple, sacrifices, and priests to do that. Who will recognize the need for a Savior? Who are these, “his people,” whom Jesus will save?

This miraculous conception fulfills the Scriptures:

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.” (1:22)

This was given as a sign to King Ahaz of the Lord's presence in time of distress (Isa 7:14). 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)

Matthew next answers where Jesus was born: “in Bethlehem of Judea” (2:1). But why there? Matthew introduces three new sets of characters: Herod the Great, King of the Jews, the religious leaders in Jerusalem, and some magi from the east.

The magi were not kings, they were not three in number, and their names were not Melchior, Balthazar and Gaspar. Magi were learned men who examined the heavens and practiced what today we consider the widely separate disciplines of astronomy and astrology. They were perhaps from Babylon or further east in Persia, both places with large Jewish communities. From these Jews they may have learnt about Balaam's prophecy, “a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel” (Num 24:17). We don't know what sort of star they saw, either in the east or in its rising. Many suggestions have been offered for this star of Bethlehem. In 1614 Kepler, the famous astronomer, offered his opinion. In October astronomers met to commemorate the 400th anniversary of that with a colloquium on the star of Bethlehem.

Whatever they saw prompted them to seek one born king of the Jews in order to worship him. Herod was troubled; this was not surprising for he was paranoid. All Jerusalem was troubled with him, perhaps fearing how their paranoid king might overreact.

Herod summoned the religious leadership who informed him that the Scriptures clearly showed that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, as told in Micah 5:2, to which they append a verse about David: “You shall be shepherd of my people Israel” (2 Sam 5:2). It is fitting that the son of David be born in David's birthplace. Earlier Micah had announced the destruction of Jerusalem because of Judah's sin (Mic 3:12). In bringing forth a new ruler, God would go back before Jerusalem to Bethlehem.

With this information the magi continue their journey, guided by the star. Falling before the child they worship him and offer their costly gifts. Here are Gentile nobles rendering tribute and worship to the son of David, in fulfilment of Psalm 72, a psalm about Solomon, the son of David:

**May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands
render him tribute;
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts!
May all kings fall down before him,
all nations serve him!** (Ps 72:10-11)

4. Whence (2:13-23)

Though Jesus was born in Bethlehem, other places featured in his infancy. Matthew shows whence he came: from Egypt to Nazareth, again in fulfilment of the Scriptures. There are three short scenes, each ending with the fulfilment 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 die. Egypt was the place where Jacob and his sons went in order to be preserved, kept alive, during a great famine. They were 70 in number, Israel *in nuce*, in kernel. Similarly, Jesus was kept

alive in Egypt, a new Israel *in nuce*. Thus was 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 love. The next verse reads:

**The more they were called,
the more they went away. (Hos 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 was 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. Such behavior led Augustus to quip, “I would rather be Herod’s pig (*hus*) than his son (*huios*).” Given Herod’s attempts to prove himself Jewish, at least the pig had a good chance of staying alive. 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 seed long promised. And the distraught mothers were also repeating earlier history, fulfilling what was spoken by Jeremiah (Jer 31:15), where Rachel mourned her descendants carried into exile. This verse comes just a few verses before the promise of a new covenant (31:31-34). The Lord has heard the grieving and remembers still; there is hope for the future.

4.3 Return to Nazareth (2:19-23)

In a third dream, the angel of the Lord tells Joseph that it is safe to return home. But where is home? It is 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 is dead but he has been succeeded by a ruler who is 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, a title which he coveted. He proved such a bad ruler that in AD 6 Rome banished him to far-away Gaul, and instituted direct rule through a prefect. Well might Joseph be afraid of him.

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. Galilee is the region of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali which formerly the Lord had “brought into contempt,” but in this latter time,

**he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the
Jordan, Galilee of the nations.**

**The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone. (Isa 9:1-2)**

Joseph brought his family to live “in a city called Nazareth.” This too was in fulfillment of the 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 Old Testament. The settlement was not even in existence in Old Testament times. Describing it as a “city” is very generous of the ESV. Even “town” used by most other English versions is generous. Nazareth is today a city, but in the first century it was a very small village. 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 word *netser*, meaning “shoot.” As Isaiah foretold:

**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. For nearly a century Israel had been an independent kingdom; its kings were Jewish but were not of the tribe of Judah or the line of David. Now the people once again had a king, Herod, King of the Jews, but he wasn’t even properly Jewish. 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. Isaiah continues:

**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)**

The magi, from the nations, have come and inquired; they have offered their gifts and bowed down in worship and humble adoration. We, too, drawn from the nations, have come and inquired. We, too, bring our gifts and bow in worship and humble adoration. This is Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham, born in Bethlehem, called out of Egypt, the Nazarene. He is the fulfillment of Israel’s trajectory. His name is Jesus for he will save his people from their sins. Since the purpose of God’s promise to Abraham was that all nations find blessing in him and his seed, we are blessed in this Jesus Christ, the son of Abraham. Since the purpose of God’s covenant with David was that his son reign over all the earth, we bow as subjects of this Jesus Christ, the son of David, taking him as our king. This Jesus is our Savior for he welcomes us as his people. We are grafted into the tree that the Lord has sprouted from the rootstock of Jesse.

This is Immanuel, God with us. At the end of the gospel Jesus will say, “behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:20). On this, the second Sunday of Advent, we celebrate that God has come to be with us in the birth of Jesus Christ. Immanuel, God with us.

1. In recent prayer books this collect has been moved from the second Sunday of the Church Year to the last Sunday, the Sunday before Advent.