



HOLIDAY HOME TOUR

★ CHRISTMAS IN ALL FOUR GOSPELS ★

Christmas at Matthew's House

Matthew 1:1-16

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

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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 and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus, who is called the Messiah.

Last week we visited Mark's house — a place that is smaller than the rest. Strictly functional. There's no outward signs of Christmas anywhere in sight. No tree, no lights, no wreath, no shepherds or sheep, and not even a baby, because in Mark's gospel, he's worried less about where Jesus is born and more about where Jesus can be found, here and now.

Today we move along to the second stop on our holiday home tour, this time visiting Matthew's house. Christmas at Matthew's house is everything Mark's isn't. Most notably, it's the biggest house around. It's absolutely enormous. It's loud and boisterous and when they start to sing carols, there's almost always a good natured disagreement because some folks really love the old school hymns, while others prefer something a bit more, well, a bit more modern. And at least one person, at least one person, will say, "Well, you know, back home, we always do it *this* way. We always sing *these* songs." And someone will tease them about that, and someone will laugh, and someone else will raise a glass, and it's just, well, it's just so darn joyously loud that they wouldn't hear you if you were stop by and ring the doorbell — so they've just left the door wide open. Every so often someone looks over and sees someone new standing in the doorway, and they bellow, "Well come on in, won't you? What are you waiting for?"

And maybe I shouldn't bring this up — I don't want you to be worried, I just want you to be prepared — but Christmas last year was so raucous that Matthew received a citation. "Disturbing the peace," the charges read. So now Matthew's house is a house with a bit of a reputation.

That wild party Matthew throws, though, is not just any holiday party. Christmas at Matthew's house is a family reunion. A family reunion where everyone is invited. The entire family. And I mean *entire*. That's what Matthew means to communicate when he begins his Christmas story with a long, complicated genealogy.

A number of years ago now, I was trying to make it back to Michigan to see my family on Christmas Day. For all sorts of reasons, most of them having to do with snow, I didn't make it. I had to stay overnight in a hotel, and I finally made it to Detroit mid-day on the 26th. I was a little grumpy about it, but when I got to my childhood home, I discovered that everything had been on pause. The gifts were all still wrapped, the cookies all still intact. My brother's middle child, Logan, was quick to explain. "Oh, we didn't wait to wait," he said. "This was not our idea." I think he had his head already inside of gift bag when he said this. "We didn't want to wait," he said, "But Daddy said we had to. Daddy said it isn't Christmas until everyone's home."

Matthew would say the same. That's why he includes all the names he does. Because it isn't Christmas until everyone's home. That's why if you look closely at the big tree at Matthew's house, the tree they gather around and sing around and tell stories around — you'll see it's a little different than the trees here in the Sanctuary. At Matthew's, the Christmas tree is a family tree. Of course it is. A family tree for a family reunion.

He begins with Abraham, the patriarch of all Israel. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and we can't hear about Abraham without hearing God promise, "I will make your offspring as many as there are stars in the sky." And we can't hear about Isaac without hearing God say, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, who you love..."

We hear Boaz was the father of Obed by Ruth and we can't hear about Ruth without hearing, "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God."

And we hear that Manasseh was the father of Amos and we can't hear about Amos without hearing him declare that there will be a day when "justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

And we hear that Aminadab was the father of Nahshon, and we can't hear about Nahshon without realizing we have no idea who Nahshon is. That we've never even heard his name before and we won't ever hear it again. He's apparently not particularly important — more or less a nobody — but we can't get to Christmas without him. Because it's not Christmas until everybody's home.

We hear that David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and we can't hear about that one without, well, without wondering why Matthew chose to phrase that one the way he did. He could have just said David was the father of Solomon by Bathsheba. That would fit the pattern set above and it would downplay a bit of scandal...

I bet most of you have seen the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree. If not in person, at least on TV. It must be the most famous Christmas tree, or at least the most well documented. The tree is massive and astonishingly manicured. The head gardener at Rockefeller Center is a man named Eric Pauze. He says the search for the ideal tree actually takes more than a year, and he searches the entire country. The final 80 to 90 foot tall candidate is chosen because it has an ideal shape and color and majesty, from every angle. "This tree," Pauze says, "can have no bad sides, no imperfections."

Matthew holds his Christmas tree, his family tree, to no such standard. Maybe that's why we hear that David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah. Maybe that's why the brokenness of that situation is laid plain. Because it's not Christmas until everybody's home, and that includes the scoundrels along with the saints, everything broken along with everything beautiful.

And about the wife of Uriah — about Bathsheba, and Tamar, and Rahab, and Ruth: scripture is very clear that those women are all Gentiles, which is to say, they weren't Jewish, which is to say, they were outsiders. By naming them the way he does, Matthew draws attention to that. He makes space for the

interlopers, the other. Because — do you need to hear it again? — at Matthew's house, it's just not Christmas until everybody is home. *Everybody*.

That is the story of Matthew's gospel. That the good news of Jesus Christ isn't good news unless it's good news for *everyone*. If you have ever been told that you aren't good enough; if you have ever felt judged by the world or even by the church; if you have ever been told that your faith is lacking or your sin is insurmountable or your choices are unacceptable; if you have ever been told that you come from the wrong place or live in the wrong neighborhood; if you have ever worried that your accent is too strong or your mistakes too big; if you have ever felt too broken or been told you're too broken, Matthew's Christmas story is for you. In fact, if I understand the text, I think what Matthew is saying is not only that the Christmas story is for you, I think he's also saying the Christmas story is incomplete *without* you.

There's one more thing about Christmas at Matthew's house. Matthew holds the pattern of inclusion all the way through his genealogy. and he holds his cadence, too. So-and-so was the father of so-and-so, and so-and-so was the father of so-and-so. But then, at the end, when we get to Joseph, Matthew breaks form. We hear that Jacob was the father of Joseph and that Joseph was the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, the Messiah. It's interesting. We're given 40 generations of Joseph's family, only for Matthew to suddenly make it clear that Joseph is in fact not actually related to this baby.

The one who gives birth to this baby, at least the way Matthew tells the story, drops in seemingly out of nowhere. She could be anyone, which is probably exactly Matthew's point. But the father... We typically tell the story that Mary gives birth to the baby, and Joseph adopts the baby. But a friend of mine, Scott Black Johnston,¹ he wonders if maybe it isn't the other way around. What if when the angel comes to Joseph, he hears not a command to adopt the baby himself, but rather a promise that he himself is the one being adopted, Joseph and his entire family, stretching all the way back to Abraham?

What I think this means — what I think it means to celebrate Christmas at Matthew's house — is this: we are all swept up in this gospel story. It includes us all. The expected and unexpected. The righteous and unrighteous. The insiders and outsiders. The beautiful and the broken. The worthy and the unworthy. The sinners and the saints. And that inclusion is God's business, God's doing, not ours. It is irresistible, in the most literal sense of the word.

I mentioned before that Matthew's house has a reputation for disrupting the peace. You understand now, don't you? It's never easy when all of humanity is brought together. But I think Matthew would suggest it only gets harder the longer we insist on living otherwise. Which is why if you spend Christmas with Matthew, you'll hear a clear invitation. An invitation to no longer be defined by hurt, but by our hope. An invitation to no longer be defined by who we exclude, but by who we include. An invitation to trust that no matter how messy our human story may be, Jesus Christ, the light of the world, still comes to claim us all.

That's why we lit the candle of peace earlier this morning. Because at Matthew's house, at Matthew's enormous, expansive house, everything is possible. Everything is possible so long as everyone is there.

¹ The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City.