

“Christmas at Matthew’s House”

Series: *Christmas at the Gospel Writers’ Homes*

Rev. Pen Peery

Date: December 15, 2024



This Advent we’ve been looking at the way each of the gospel writers frames the gift of the incarnation – that is, God’s decision to enter this world in the person of Jesus Christ.

Our way to do that has been to “visit” each of the gospel writers’ homes. We spent time with Mark – who doesn’t even mention what we know of as Christmas. Mark’s house would be like the one on your block that sits dark and empty amidst the more festive homes. Mark is in too big of a hurry to introduce us to the work of the adult Jesus to even mention a baby.

Last week, Anna took us on a tour of John’s home – which had luminaries marking the front walk and candles in each window. John understands the incarnation to be about light shining in the darkness – almost defiantly claiming the power of love.

Today we will tour Matthew’s house. But before we do, I ask that you join me in prayer and then be centered by the choir as we approach God’s word. Pray with me:

Holy God – in the midst of the frenzy...in this time of year where we bone-up on our time-management-strategies to squeeze in everything we think we need...or ought...to do – this morning, in these moments, slow us down that we might dwell in your word. Through this Scripture, give us a glimpse of truth...and help us take this truth beyond the moment so that we are shaped by it when we leave this place. We ask it in Christ’s name. Amen.

A reading from 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.

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Can we just acknowledge that Joseph was dealing with a lot?

Joseph, of course, isn’t the focus of the Christmas story. In spite of what you might think based on nativity plays, Joseph is not the lead, but is arguably a minor character. Joseph doesn’t get very many verses the Bible – today’s passage is kind of his big and only moment.

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We know about Joseph is that he (like Jesus) was Jewish...and followed the law and customs of Judaism. We have pieced together that Joseph was a builder. He lived in a small town in Northern Israel called Nazareth in the region of Galilee. Just before the verses that I read this morning, Matthew traces Joseph’s family tree back through some Jewish Blue-Bloods. King Solomon, King David...all the way back to Abraham.

These are a few of the things we know about Joseph. But did you know that Joseph never actually says a word in the Bible? Not one word.

The only glimpse we get of Joseph’s character is this story – where, he goes from being engaged to Mary, to finding out she was pregnant by someone who wasn’t him, to deciding to take the gracious and compassionate path and not expose Mary to public shame, to encountering an angel who tells him (a) it’s God’s baby, (b) the baby was going to save the people from their sins, (c) to go ahead and marry so this child and all that he represents will be Joseph’s responsibility as a father.

It’s a lot.

And, it seems, instead of getting overwhelmed and running away, that Joseph is steady, and faithful, and committed.

But, get this...there’s more.

If you keep reading the way Matthew tells the story of Christmas, in the very next verse after we stopped our Scripture today, we hear about the visit of the wise men from the East who came to pay the baby Jesus homage.

In Matthew, the first people to recognize the gift of the Messiah weren’t Jewish. The assumption was that when the Messiah came, it would be for the home crowd...for the religion that had the idea of Messiah in the first place. This would only make sense. But by relaying the story of the visit of the wise men – who were decidedly NOT Jewish – Matthew sends the signal that, in Jesus, the Messiah had come for the other nations, too...for the world.

Poor Joseph was already *just beginning* to wrap his head around what it might be to have a baby boy of his own...much less to begin to understand how important this baby would be to Joseph’s own...more immediate, Jewish family. Now he learns that his baby boy is important to the *world*...even to people and places that Joseph has never heard about or experienced.

And it was Joseph’s job to raise him. No pressure.

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Thinking about those wise men who showed up a little late to that first Christmas gathering has me wondering if any of you remember what it was like...maybe when you were first engaged or married to your spouse or partner...or, maybe that first time the new, blended family got together all in one place...I wonder

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if you remember what it was like that first time you did a big, Christmas gathering with your new version of family.

And I wonder – since this is a safe space – if we can admit together that when that happened...it might have been a little awkward. Robert Earl Keen’s Christmas ballad comes to mind.

It’s a lot of navigate.

Different traditions.

Different ways to make the cranberry sauce and the gravy.

Is it stockings, Santa, breakfast, presents? Or Santa, presents, breakfast, stockings? Or no-holds-barred and eat when you get hungry later?

What is safe to talk about at the dinner table? What isn’t safe? What do you *wear* to the dinner table?

Do you go to church on Christmas Eve? If so, which service?

I remember the first Christmas I spent with Lindsey’s family. She was the first in her family to get married, so I was the first “outlaw” to puncture the family bubble on a High and Holy Holiday. Lindsey’s parents (and sister) could not have been more gracious, of course...they asked what of my family traditions we might include so that I would feel a sense of home, too. But I remember feeling like me being there meant that things were – and were going to continue to be – different. That’s kind of what happens when you increase the boundaries of who is considered family – it changes things.

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This Christmas, for the first time in six Christmases, the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris will welcome people through its doors for worship. You may remember that more than five years ago Notre Dame burned – the spire and roof collapsing into a pile of smoldering ruin.

When there is a fire to a well-known building it makes the news. But when that building is 900 years old; when it is literally the centerpiece around which a world class city like Paris was built; when it has that much significance – when a building like that burns down, it is more than news...it is devastating.

I heard a great podcast this week that told the story about how Notre Dame was rebuilt.¹ A General in the French Army was in charge of the project. It cost nearly a billion dollars. A team of 1,200 artisans, construction workers, and engineers worked – every day – behind the privacy of a wall the French government constructed around the job site.

In the process of the work of restoration, it became more and more obvious just who considered the cathedral to be their home.

I found one detail of the construction fascinating. Each of the beams of the roof that had burned contained the initials of the original carpenters who had fashioned those trusses out of trees hundreds of years before. In the reconstruction, great care was taken to find *just the right tree* that would become a replacement for

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/11/podcasts/the-daily/notre-dame-reopens.html>

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each truss...and, then, the initials of both the original carpenter and the new one were etched into the wood. It was important for the renovated cathedral to honor the place and memory of those who had loved it before.

As the day the cathedral reopened...just eight days ago...as that day approached, the excitement around it grew. And those who were eager to be in the space again weren’t just residents of Paris, or members of the Roman Catholic Church, or, even, necessarily, believers at all...but people of all stripes, and nations, and backgrounds, and traditions, and lifestyles. Sure, some of them were interested in the project from an architectural or artistic standpoint...but, if you listen to the interviews, many more are drawn to the place because of its spiritual significance...compelled to want to be in a place that has been centered on telling the story of God’s faithfulness for generation after generation. Those involved in the renovation of the cathedral knew that it was important for the church to make space for the fullest expression of what it meant to be part of God’s family.

This Christmas Eve Notre Dame will, once again, host Christmas Mass...and inside the restored walls of that sanctuary, a group of very different people who reflect our world will gather, raise candles, and sing about the gift Emmanuel – God with us.

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When the gospel of Matthew starts – the very first thing it does is list a genealogy...Joseph’s family tree. It is important for Matthew to remind his readers that the story of the good news of Jesus is grounded in a particular family with a particular history.

But do you know how the gospel of Matthew ends? In its last chapter?

It is with the resurrected Jesus standing on a mountain in Galilee – near his and Joseph’s hometown – telling his disciples that the place that the gospel needs to be lived is out there...in the world...beyond the familiar confines of home.

Because God didn’t send Jesus just to save “us” – God sent Jesus to save “all of us.”

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If you were to visit Matthew’s house at Christmas there would be a lot of cars in the driveway and kind of spread out on the street. Some of them fancy...some of them junkers. The food in the kitchen would be a mix: some sweet potato casserole, and ham, and turkey, and dressing...but probably, too, some curried goat, and tabouli, and jerk chicken, and mango.

The house would be decorated – but it might be hard to distinguish a theme. The neighbors might even think the decorations are tacky...or, at least, too much.

It would be loud – with music and conversation going on in different languages.

It would probably sound and feel a bit chaotic...and it would definitely be holy.

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When the angel told Joseph that he was being asked to help his strangely pregnant fiancée raise the baby...he had **no idea**. No idea how that child would affect his life – and certainly no idea how the child would affect the lives of others.

Even though we are never told about it – because Joseph doesn’t really show up again in the story – but don’t you think he must have realized some things along the way? The first clue was from those from-way-out-of-town-visitors from the East that first Christmas...who brought gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. After them, who knows who else strange or unexpected showed up along the way as years sped on?

I have to think that one of the things that Joseph learned about this baby that he was asked to raise as his own was that the child was special...and that his life and purpose were compelling to people. That there was **something about him** that drew people in – at home, yes, and **well** beyond home. And that because of his life, things would change...and be different. And, sometimes accommodating that difference might feel a little awkward...maybe even a little bit like a disruption.

But, then again, that’s just what happens when the family grows.

For Matthew, God’s decision to enter our world in the person of Jesus is for that purpose: to grow the family...to expand our definition of just for whom Jesus was born.

So that all might know the gift of what it is to be saved.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.