



The Way of Jesus: Draw Near  
Matthew 1:1-16  
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December 24, 2019  
Christmas Eve

I wonder what your favorite Christmas story is. I suspect that some of you think of a treasured book or a favorite movie, a story known by many. And I imagine that others of you remember something that happened at a family gathering, or while you were walking down the street, a story known by only a few. But I am certain that not one of you calls to mind of a long list of ancient names, hard to pronounce and harder to remember, hardly a story at all. Or so it seems.

One of my favorite Christmas stories is unique to my family. A few years ago I was driving from Kansas City up to Detroit on Christmas Day. I made it just past Chicago before the blizzard stopped me. Surrendering to the inevitable, I took the next exit advertising a hotel. I parked the car and looked at Reilly, my trusty, furry sidekick of many years. At that point in the evening, I was still willing to be honest. I walked into the lobby and asked for a room. "I'm not going to make it home tonight," I said. "It's just me and my dog." "Sorry," they said. "No dogs allowed."

At the next hotel, I decided Jesus would understand if I didn't tell the whole truth. I paid for a room, "accidentally" forgot to mention my

four-legged roommate and attempted to sneak him in a side entrance. That probably would have been an effective (if not morally questionable) plan except the weather outside meant they had locked every door but the front. I was left to confess: "I have my dog with me. It's a blizzard. It's not safe to drive. Can he please come inside?" "I'm sorry," they said. "No dogs." "I just want to check," I said, "That on Christmas Day, you are turning away a young woman who is desperately looking for a place to spend the night. You are saying, essentially, that there's no room at the inn." My theological guilt trip was lost on them. They told me we could sleep in the parking lot.

The third try was a charm ... so to speak. We were the only Christmas residents of a run down, extended stay motel. Reilly and I split some leftover cookies for dinner, and I fell asleep to the bright lights of a snowplow working overtime in the parking lot. I thought this was good news, until the next morning, when I discovered that the plow had packed a good three feet of snow all around my car. I went to the front desk to ask for some help. They handed me a shovel.

Eventually, I made it home to Detroit, where my family was waiting for me. I thought I had had a rough 24 hours, but it turns out my nieces and nephew had it harder. At the tender ages of 3, 6, and 8 years old, they had been prohibited from opening a single present until I arrived. I thanked them all for waiting, and my nephew, Logan, whose head was already buried in a gift bag, declared, "It wasn't our idea. We didn't want to wait. But daddy said it's not Christmas until everyone is home."

It's not Christmas until everyone is home. I think that's the story Matthew means to tell us with his long recitation of names. He's getting at something more important than facts. He has to be — because his facts are terribly wrong, almost humorously wrong. Take Rahab, for instance. Matthew tells us that Rahab and Salmon were the parents of Boaz, which would be more than a little difficult, given that Rahab and Salmon were separated by over 200 years.

Any good genealogist — heck, any mediocre genealogist — will tell you that accuracy and details matter, and if Matthew's only objective was to connect Jesus all the way back to Abraham, he'd be standing on shaky ground, because if you are dealing exclusively in facts, once one fact falls, you are out of luck and out of business. So if Matthew is wholly unconcerned with these sorts of factual issues, what is it he so desperately wants us to hear? Maybe that it's not Christmas until everyone is home.

He begins with Genesis. 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 my God." And we hear Manasseh was the father of Amos and we can't hear about Amos without hearing him declare "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

All of which is to say — it's the whole story. In 16 short verses, Matthew reminds us of God's entire history with God's people, of every promise made and kept, of every promise that has held us together and is holding us still.

There are some interesting choices, to be sure. Noah, for example, builder of the ark, recipient of the rainbow covenant, Noah doesn't make the cut, but Nashon does. Remember Nashon? Me neither.

But maybe you do remember the five women included. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and then finally Mary. These women all have their own individual stories, but together they tell Matthew's larger story — that not only are God's promises faithful and true, but God's promises are big enough for everyone.

You see, Matthew, more than any of the others, writes a gospel for the Gentiles. That's a fancy way of saying Matthew writes for those who are not Jewish, which is a nice way of saying Matthew writes for those who are outsiders, who haven't found their place, who aren't sure if or where they belong, or worse, have been told they don't belong. Because up until Mary — the four women mentioned? All Gentiles. All individuals not of the right lineage or heritage or upbringing, all individuals looked down upon, maybe for their past, maybe for their attitude, maybe for their assertiveness, maybe for their skin color, maybe because they

do things differently, maybe because of their persistence...in any case, if anyone other than Matthew had written this genealogy, not one of them would have been included.

So by naming them, Matthew draws attention to their otherness, their outsider-ness. It is no accident or oversight. Matthew takes the story of God's history and interrupts it with these ... interlopers, these women, who in this particular instance, do what the men cannot. Think about it. Jesus was Jewish, right? For that Jewish lineage to be preserved, all the men in the genealogy *had* to be Jewish. They had to be. It doesn't work any other way. Genetics doesn't work any other way. The women are the way the Gentiles, the outsiders, the no-goods and nobodies, are explicitly welcomed into the story, too.

They are the ones who make the story big enough for everyone. By virtue of being who they are, by being exactly who God created them to be, they make the Christmas story one that embraces you. Whoever you are: Whether you have told before that you aren't good enough or that your lifestyle is unpleasing ... If you have been told that your faith is lacking or your sin is insurmountable or your choices are unacceptable ... If you have ever been told you come from the wrong place or live in the wrong neighborhood or that your accent is too strong ... If you have ever felt too broken or been told you're too broken ... Matthew's Christmas story is for you.

And in fact, if I understand the text, I think Matthew is saying is not only that the Christmas story is for you — he's also saying that the Christmas story is incomplete *without* you.

Because later in his gospel he includes the stories of the centurion and his servant, and the Canaanite woman and her daughter. Again,

all Gentiles, all outsiders — and yet all explicitly praised by Jesus for their remarkable faith. He includes the Beatitudes — “Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...”

And it is in his gospel that Jesus says, “Come to me.” “Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

So of course Matthew includes Isaac, who knew his father's near-betrayal and Jacob, who grieved the loss of his youngest son and Tamar, who watched her city get ransacked. He includes Ruth, a widow, and David, who sang, but who also wept. He includes Jachoniah, who saw his people deported to Babylon.

And I can only assume that if Matthew were writing today, he would include my friend Mark, Mark, the father of Timothy, who saw his 16 year old son die on Thanksgiving morning after falling from a five story building. Mark, who is also a pastor, who knows the story of this night, has written poignantly in these most recent days. “When Timothy fell,” he said, “I did not know how to go on. My family did not know how to go on. We have been numb for weeks. But I am remembering — I am starting to remember — what Christmas means. A friend told me what they believe,” he said. “My friend said that the great mystery of Christmas is that somehow, God puts on flesh, and God comes to earth, and God walks on the same ground we do, and so, [his friend told him,] I have become convinced that Christmas means when Timothy fell from five stories up, he fell straight into the arms of God. And when you are about to fall over from the heartbreak of it all, it is God's arms that will catch you, too.”

Mark said, “Those words from my friend, they were healing. We don't celebrate

Christmas because of what we get. We celebrate Christmas because of what we've already been given — a God that is with us always, a God that stays with us always."

Mark, of course, is right. Christmas is God, wrapped up in flesh, finding us, a little baby born to us, sent from the center of God's own heart to make a home among us, right where we are. Whoever we are. However we are.

Christmas means we don't actually have to find our way home anymore. Because when Christ is born, home comes to us.

On our own, that can be so hard to see. So hard to remember.

But together, with Jacob and Judah with Obed and Jesse with Rehoboam and Abijah with Eliakim and Azor, with Joseph and Mary, with Mark and Timothy, with Barbara and Dick, with Nancy and Tana, with Joshua and Kevin and Bill and Denise — with all of us together, we can be reminded. And that is why we will light candles at the end of the service this evening. So that candle by candle, the light will spread through the room until it is the only thing we can see. In that moment, Christmas will come, and we will all be home.

But don't take my word for it. It's the word of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.