



Celebrating Christmas With Matthew

TEXT
Matthew 1:1–25

December 9, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Matthew has invited us to his house this week. Unlike Mark's wilderness place where there is no knowledge of Christmas, Matthew is all about Christmas. Some are around the piano singing *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. *We Three Kings* is a favorite at Matthew's house. He has a tree with bright lights, and of course, there is an angel on top. He has hung a big star from a tree in the front yard. Around the trunk of that tree is a blue ribbon that reads, "It's a boy." And the magi have arrived. It's odd that the magi show up here. These kings or wise men or whoever they are, they have shown up as something of party crashers.

Based on the crowd gathered at Matthew's house, you might think there is a festival of some sorts; but the truth is, it's just a family reunion. All of Joseph's family is gathered. I mean *all* of them.

Over by the tree in some easy chairs, you will find Abraham; you know, father Abraham. He's Joseph's great, great ... 40 generations ... great-grandfather. He's got some years on him now, as does the guy sitting next to him, King David. Matthew can't

celebrate Christmas without these guys. They are heroes of Judaism.

It may surprise you, but Christmas at Matthew's house is a Jewish celebration. I know, I know. But remember, Christmas is the celebration of the birth of the Messiah. The Messiah is the promised one of Judaism. Matthew is Jewish, and so are the people at his house — except the magi; they are Gentiles. They have crashed this family reunion. Why these Gentiles have traveled who knows how far to celebrate the birth of the Jewish Messiah is something of a mystery. But let's start where Matthew starts: with Jesus' family tree.

Abraham was the father of Isaac. You remember them: Abraham and Sarah, barren for decades, until Isaac was born. Isaac was the father of Jacob. You remember Jacob and Esau. Every time Esau turned around, he was being snookered by Jacob, including right here. Matthew doesn't mention Esau in the genealogy, but rather Jacob, the baby brother, gets all the attention.

It goes on generation after generation. Jesse was the father of King David, the shepherd boy, giant-slayer, who becomes king. With every name, there is

a story. The stories continue all the way to Matthan, who was the father of Jacob, and Jacob, the father of Joseph, and Joseph, the father of ... uhh, no! ... Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.

OK, it gets a bit messy here, because it's clear that Matthew has marched through the generations to show Jesus' link to Jewish royalty. But when he gets to the last link in the chain, Joseph turns out not to be the kid's father. No, Joseph is the guy who marries the mother of the Emmanuel child.

Joseph is a main character in Matthew's telling, but he's not the father of Jesus. Scholars say he is Jesus' father legally because when he names Jesus, he is actually adopting him. OK. But after 40 generations of "the father of" to be "the husband of" — well, it's a bit messy.

My friend Rev. Scott Black Johnston is the Senior Pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. He's just a few blocks from Rockefeller Center, where every year they erect a massive Christmas tree. If you haven't seen it in New York, you have no doubt seen it at one time or another on TV. Scott reports that Erik Pauze is the head gardener at Rockefeller Center

and oversees the search for the tree. He spends the entire year searching for the right tree. The final 80- to 90-foot tall candidate is chosen because it has an ideal shape and color and majesty. “This tree,” says Pauze, “can have no bad sides.”¹

You might find a Christmas tree with no bad sides, but we seldom have luck with that. When the Ares find our Christmas tree, we usually agree, “Well, we could put that side in the corner.” Our Christmas tree goes in a corner for a reason. That’s where we hide the gaps and bald spots.

When it comes to the family tree of Jesus, we might expect if there are some problem spots, they would be hidden. But no, Matthew brings the messy parts right out in the open. It turns out Jesus’ family is as messy as most.

My grandfather, my dad’s dad, ran away from home as a kid. He hopped a train in Maine and rode it to anywhere it would go. His trip ended in Charleston, South Carolina, when he fell off the train. The fall left him with a broken arm and a bumped head. The arm healed, but the jolt to his noggin left him with memory loss. He couldn’t remember his name.

For weeks, he was in the children’s ward at Roper Hospital, beds lined up against the wall. He was in bed “R.” Since he couldn’t remember his real name, he just took a name from the children’s ward, bed “R,” and so his claimed name was Ward Are. I am embarrassed to tell you how long I believed that story.

The truth is, his mother died when he was young, and his fa-

ther brought him to Charleston. His father, my great grandfather, died soon thereafter. He did find himself alone in his teen years. He lived in an upstairs room above the Leland Moore Paint store. Mr. Moore let him live and work there. It was home for my grandfather, and he never left the paint business.

For reasons he would never tell us, he did not wish to contact his family. Thirty years later, my uncle was in the service and was stationed in New England. He met some Ares and called my grandfather to tell him, “I think I have found some family.”

My grandfather responded, “Don’t talk to those people, and you come home right now.” My uncle is in the Army, and my grandfather is telling him to come home like he’s late for curfew. Well, I have to tell you, even today I don’t know what was going on in that part of my own family, but I imagine it was a bit messy.

Matthew would get that. A closer read of Jesus’ family tree reveals more than a few branches that would raise an eyebrow or two in ancient Israel. There are five women to start with. This was not the norm in those days. No, ancient genealogies were all men, the father of the father of the father of. Tom Long says reading Jesus’ family tree is like opening a 1949 yearbook from West Point or some other all-male institution and finding cadets named Lucy and Susan and Cynthia.²

Judah was the father of Perez by Tamar. Tamar was a brave woman in her own right. But

Tamar was a Canaanite. This is the family tree of the Jewish Messiah. Why would Matthew want us to know Jesus has a Gentile in his family tree? Not just one; Ruth was a Moabite woman. There was no love for Moabites in Israel. Deuteronomy says, not even their descendants to the tenth generation can be welcomed in the Assembly of the people. Rahab is there. Oh my! Rahab was a prostitute. That’s awkward. When was the last time you went to a Christmas party and someone said, “Have you met my Auntie Rahab, you know, the prostitute?” Not sure why Matthew is doing this.

But that’s not as bad as David, the father of Solomon. Solomon was that king who built the temple — Solomon, a man of wisdom; David, the father of Solomon, by the wife of Uriah. David sexually assaulted Bathsheba and then tried to have Uriah, her husband, killed in battle. Nobody wants to bring that up.

It turns out that Jesus’ family, like most families, is messy. We all have a crazy Uncle Louie.

Pat Conroy is an award-winning author, and most of what he writes is taken from his own family life. In his book *The Death of Santini*, he describes his abusive father this way: “I came into the world as the son of a Marine Corps fighter pilot as fierce as Achilles. He was ... comfortable with machine-gun fire and napalm. He fought well and honorably in three wars, and at one time was one of the most highly decorated Marine aviators in the Corps. He was also meaner

than a ... rat, and I remember hating him even when I was in diapers.”³

Sometimes it is the family that is the greatest source of our pain in life. Every family is messy.

There’s one more woman who is a surprise in Jesus’ family tree: Mary. She’s engaged to Joseph, who is of King David’s line. Mary must be of someone’s line, but we don’t know who. We know over 40 generations of Joseph’s family, but Mary just drops out of nowhere. She could be anybody. She could be anybody, which must be the point.

Mary gives birth to the Emmanuel child, and Joseph adopts him. That’s how most read the story. But my wise friend Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston says, maybe it’s the other way around. What Joseph hears from the angel is, “Pay attention, Joseph. Do you hear what I am saying? It is you who has been adopted; in and through this baby, you and your family (stretching all the way back to Abraham) have been adopted by God.”⁴

And because Joseph’s family is as messy as it is, with prostitutes and assault victims and Cannanites, it’s clear that the Jewish Messiah has come to adopt not simply the Jewish family, but the human family, all of us — which is, of course, why these family reunion crashing magi have to be at Matthew’s house. They are the world that’s come to be included in the family. Matthew’s house, with all its Jewish focus, turns into an international bazaar. There are flags of every nation and foods

of every ethnicity, for the Gentile party crashers discover we are all in the family now.

And that is so hard to trust. I don’t know anyone who can trust it all the time, and here’s why.

It was December 7 on Friday, a day some still call Pearl Harbor Day, though I suppose fewer and fewer think about it. Maybe that’s a good thing. For on that day, over seven decades ago, we became enemies with Japan. We went to war, and lots of young men on both sides were wrapped in death in the flag of their nation. Pearl Harbor is attached to December 7.

December 8, among other things, was the date that John Lennon was shot in 1980. No doubt, many others with lesser names were shot on December 8 as well.

December 9, in 1992, 1,800 Marines arrived in Somalia, a desperate and conflicted part of the world.

My point is, there is not a day that has not been marked by messiness in the human family. There is not a day that the pain of the human family has failed to touch. It is so pervasive that we might think that God would just give up on this world.

But no, no matter how messy the human story is, this child has still come to claim us, to claim us all.

If you spend a day at Matthew’s house, you will hear the clear invitation.

Let us no longer be defined by our hurt, but by our hope.

Let us no longer be defined by our race or our station or our nation, but by the one who has

claimed us and adopted us into this story of immeasurable hope.

We will no longer be defined by the messiness in our lives, but by the one who writes our names into the branches of the family tree of the Emmanuel Child.⁵ Imagine that. At least try to imagine that.

¹Scott shared his sermon with me, “Christmas at Matthew’s House,” which he preached for Day One. I am grateful to him for this story and for other places Scott has influenced this sermon.

²Tom Long, *Matthew* (1997), p. 10

³Pat Conroy, *The Death of Santini* (2013), p. 1

⁴Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, *Christmas at Matthew’s House*, preached on Day One and probably at Fifth Ave Presbyterian Church on this same day. I am grateful for his wise insight into the text.

⁵*Ibid.*

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.