

## *In the Church*

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent – December 3/4, 2005

### Sermon Background Study

*Matthew 1:1-2, 16-24 (NRSV)*

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

<sup>2</sup>Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,

[the genealogy continues . . . ]

<sup>16</sup>and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

<sup>17</sup>So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

<sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: <sup>23</sup>“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” <sup>24</sup>When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

*We continue our series, “Where Does Jesus Begin With You?” We gather to worship as the body of Christ, the Church, the family of God. The very beginning of Matthew’s Gospel reminds us that Jesus begins with us here, among our true family.*

#### Genealogies

One of the most interesting things about Israel’s many Old Testament genealogies is that in other ancient Near Eastern literature, genealogies are rare. Other cultures kept lists of kings, but the Israelites kept and passed on extensive family genealogies. Understanding why only Israel, will help us understand the importance of the biblical genealogies.

We can think of the genealogies as providing length and breadth to God’s people. First, the lengthy genealogies concretely tied God’s people of each generation with the ancient ancestors who had first entered into covenant with God and those who had sustained it. Thus, Matthew’s genealogy for Jesus goes back all the way to Abraham.

Second, the genealogies provided breadth in that they expressed the Israelites’ kinship, the social, religious, and political ties they shared. Ultimately, they were one tribe, one people . . . all of whom could trace their genealogy back to Jacob and then Isaac and then Abraham.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is for all people at all times and in all places who are bound together into one people through faith in Jesus Christ and faith alone. As Paul wrote, “Understand, then that those who have faith are children of Abraham.” We have a genealogy of our own!

I can remember as a boy occasionally undertaking to read my Bible. I had a small blue New Testament given to men and women of the armed forces. It was the King James Version, so Matthew’s Gospel opened with a long series of “begats.” By the time I reached the 42<sup>nd</sup> begat, I tended to lose my resolve. I guess I had an astoundingly short attention span back then. In any event, I could never figure out what all those “begats” had to do with anything. Why begin the first book of the New Testament with such a list? What was Matthew thinking? Didn’t he know that he needed to grab the audience (all right, me) right at the beginning? Or maybe he was happy if I simply skipped the “begats” and went on to the good stuff about the baby Jesus, leaving the “begats” for more patient readers. Now I know better.

*A prophetic key: – unlocking Matthew’s Gospel<sup>1</sup>*

Why does Matthew begin with “begats?” Let’s take a closer look at the genealogy. The first sentence of the Gospel lays it out for us. Jesus is the Messiah and can lay claim to the House of David and, like all

<sup>1</sup>The inspiration for this series is a slender volume, *Beginnings: Keys that Open the Gospels*, by Morna D. Hooker of Cambridge University. Dr. Hooker helps us to see how the beginning of each Gospel unlocks the rest of the Gospel for us – hence, the key.

Jews, to kinship with Abraham. Further, though the English translations all refer to Jesus' "genealogy," the Greek word is actually *genesis*, meaning "beginning" or "origin." Matthew could have chosen the same word for "beginning" as did Mark, *arché*, but instead he chose the word which names the first book of the Bible. Surely, Matthew wants us to grasp that Jesus has been part of God's plan from the beginning. The creative work of Christ is the creative work of God.<sup>2</sup>

In all there are forty-two generations organized into three groups: fourteen generations from Abraham to David, another fourteen from David to the Babylonian exile (which ended the reign of kings in 587BC) and another fourteen generations from the exile to Jesus.<sup>3</sup> Even the fourteen is a clue to Jesus' royal claim. As with the Roman numerals we all learned in elementary school, Hebrew numbers were represented by letters. The letters in David (DWD in Hebrew) sum to fourteen.<sup>4</sup>

**Living the With-God Life**  
*The Immanuel Principle*

Of the many beliefs that made the Israelites seem peculiar to their neighbors, few were more peculiar than their belief that there was one God, the Creator of the Cosmos, who dwelt with them. They even built God a house! First a moveable tent they called a tabernacle and then the temple in Jerusalem. God's people didn't think they could somehow enclose God in a tent, but they did believe that God dwelt with them in a way that God did not dwell with others.

With the coming of Christ, all of God's people – collectively and individually – are dwelling places of God. This is what Paul means when he speaks of the church and the believers as being God's temples. During Advent, we sing of Emmanuel. When Matthew uses the title "Emmanuel" for Jesus (1:23), it is because he understands Jesus as the fulfillment of the biblical story of God's everlasting intent to live with his people. "Emmanuel" means "God with us."

Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Eugene Peterson and others speak of this as *The Immanuel Principle* of life. They note that "The Bible is all about human life 'with God.'" It is about how God has made this "with-God" life possible and will bring it to pass. The unity of the Bible is discovered in the development of life 'with God' as a reality on earth, centered in the person of Jesus."<sup>1</sup>

1. Foster, Willard, and Peterson (all widely read at St. Andrew) are editors of the new NRSV Spiritual Formation Bible which some of us will use as our principal *Thru the Bible* version.

There is still more to the genealogy. Five women are named: Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba, Ruth, and Mary. Each is prominent in Israel's history. But each was also touched by scandal. Even Ruth, who threw herself at Boaz in the middle of the night. Perhaps Matthew includes the women so that we are better prepared for Jesus' scandalous birth.

All of this prepares us for the shape of Matthew's story – Jesus is the fulfillment of all that has come before. No other Gospel writer is so careful to portray Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Jesus is Isaiah's "Emmanuel" (Matt. 1:21). His birthplace of Bethlehem had been foretold by Micah (Matt. 2:6). Matthew wants his readers to be totally confident that Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah.

*Meeting God's people*

I am sometimes asked whether Jesus could have come to America or Britain or China, born in London or New York rather than Bethlehem. The answer is no. The Bible is the story of how God chose to reconcile humanity to himself through a people that he formed beginning with Abraham. The arrival of Jesus is the climax of that story. It is the event to which everything before had pointed. In the person of Jesus, God came to be with his people as he never had been with them before – to meet them, to comfort them, to heal them, to save them.

Just as Jesus' disciples were among the people of God, so are we. You and I. It is here, among God's people that Jesus begins with each of us. A wise Christian recently wrote, "There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship to the Church." What we think of as "church" can be messy, disappointing, and frustrating – people often are. Just read the Gospels and you'll quickly see how disappointing and frustrating the disciples were to Jesus and one another. Yet, they were his family, his true family, and so are we.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, as we approach Christmas, we all have stories to share about the joy and the frustrations of family at the holidays.

Perhaps this year, as we prepare for Jesus' birth, we might all strive to ensure that St. Andrew, our own little corner of the Church, is as joyful and giving as Jesus' family ought to be.

<sup>2</sup>Matthew uses *genesis* again when he begins his story at 1:18, where it is translated "birth."

<sup>3</sup>Don't be put off by the fact that Jesus' claim to the House of David is through Joseph. This is not about DNA. It is about Jesus' legal claim to David's throne . . . and that belongs to Jesus via Joseph, his legal, though not biological, father.

<sup>4</sup>Using letters to represent numbers was common to all the ancient cultures. In Pompeii, there is graffiti left by a schoolboy that reads "I love her whose number is 545." The letters in "Nero Caesar," the infamous Roman emperor, add to 666, as in Revelation 13.

<sup>5</sup>Paul wrote that though the people of God were once marked out by the "works of the Law," such as Sabbath-keeping and food laws, with the coming of Jesus Christ, God's people are marked out only by our faith in Christ.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(more readings from Matthew on Jesus' "genesis")*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1 Matthew 1:1-18 &amp; Luke 3:23-38</b> Matthew's full genealogy and Luke's genealogy</p>	<p><b>Day 2 Matthew 2</b> The Magi visit the Messiah and the light to Egypt</p>
<p><b>Day 3 Matthew 3</b> John the Baptist prepares the way</p>	<p><b>Day 4 Matthew 4:1-11</b> Jesus is tested in the wilderness. This section concludes Matthew's beginning to his Gospel.</p>
<p><b>Day 5 Matthew 4:12-25</b> Jesus begins to teach and to call and to heal.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

## Sermon Notes

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### **December Book Recommendation** *Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV)* On sale today outside the bookstore

### *Thru the Bible in a Year*

Many of us at St. Andrew will be reading the Bible through next year. This is not some massive new program (even if it sounds like it) but a simple invitation to join us in devoting 20 minutes or so a day to Scripture so that we might all be renewed and transformed, becoming evermore Christlike. The Spiritual Disciplines, such as regular Bible reading, are how we go about our spiritual training.

The reading plan will be distributed to everyone at St. Andrew. The plan will not take us straight from Genesis to Revelation, but will, instead, be built on reading book-by-book from the Old and New Testaments: Genesis then Matthew then Exodus then Acts and so on. We will also be distributing some tips on how to get the most out of your reading. On-line helps will be available as well. Scott is even going to re-launch his blog!

Many of us will be using the new *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV)* put together by Richard Foster, Eugene Peterson, Dallas Willard, Walter Brueggemann, and others. We are getting copies of this Bible at a much reduced price. Copies will be available for \$25 outside the bookstore beginning today. (What a gift idea for Christmas!) Of course, any Bible will do. As someone said, the best Bible for you is the one that you'll read.

We hope you'll consider joining us.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Tracing genealogies has become increasingly popular in recent years as the Internet has made the hunt for distant relatives much easier than ever before. I googled "genealogies" and got three million hits, including a multitude of commercial sites. Why do you think so many people are fascinated by family trees? What makes people spend so much time and money tracing the family history? Perhaps genealogies root us in the past, providing identity and substance to our sense existence. Trying to head off any sense of superiority on the part of Gentile-Christians, Paul speaks of them as being branches grafted onto a tree of which the Jewish-Christians are the roots (Romans 11:11-24). What do you think he means? What would it mean to you to think of yourself as a branch grafted on to such a tree? As noted in the study, Paul calls Christians "children of Abraham." He also often uses images of adoption and inheritance to describe our status in Christ.

What do you make of the statement "There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with the church."? Do you agree? Has this been your own experience? What does this statement imply about our life in the church? We don't call one another "brother" and "sister" at St. Andrew but some Christians do. Why brothers and sisters? What does it mean to you to think of yourself as part of a family that encompasses all Christians? Jesus certainly thinks that the family of disciples is the family that has first call on our lives (see Matthew 12:46-50, for example). In keeping with this series, how is it that Jesus begins with us in the church?