



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“God-Sized Gifts” Matthew 1:18-25a; Romans 1:1-7 Christmas Joy Offering

Christmas is often a family time. Our clans gather from across the country to eat, drink and be merry, for some of the best of reasons.

How many of you have researched your family tree? How many have gone back three generations? Four? Five? Six?? More?? Impressive! When I hear about people researching the family tree, there are a certain number of these folks who are surprised—or who are specifically looking for—someone famous in their family tree. If not that, perhaps there’s a scoundrel hanging in their tree—literally, a pirate or a famous criminal. I guess that gives some “color” to their simple black-and-white diagram of all their begats that have led up to their own marriage and children.

On this Sunday before Christmas, the last Sunday of the season of Advent, God gives us what amounts to Jesus’ genealogy, and it’s not like any of ours. We’ll read the famous “begats” from Matthew, chapter 1, and then the pre-natal and birth record Matthew gives us about Jesus. First the Family Tree of God, then the Nativity record. Listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

In these opening verses of his Gospel, Matthew gives us a family tree of meaning for Jesus; he wants to show us “the character of God’s Christ”. I don’t want to spend a LOT of time on this, but there are some particular clues here Matthew wants us to notice.

Matt starts with Abraham, the father of faith for Jews, Muslims and Christians. Bible history really begins with Abraham. We see the descent of the other early Patriarchs from Abraham, whom God chose and who trusted God and bound himself to God in a covenant. It’s interesting to me that little is made of the Exodus period, which otherwise is the major focus of Jewish history. Then comes the period of the Judges, which we find in the book of the same name. Then the name of King David appears, and we know we have crossed from the Judges into the Kings. Solomon, of course, the son of David. Then we descend into the tumultuous times when the Kingdom was divided, and kings rose in both the North (Israel) and in the South (Judah). Some of the kings were good—Josiah, for example—but most of the kings were bad—ineffective leaders or crooks. There was the overthrow of Israel by the Assyrians, but more comprehensive was the conquest by, and the exile in, Babylon. That was a very dark period, indeed. Returning from Babylon by the grace of God, the nation was rebuilt (though not as grand as it one had been). In short, we have here the history of God’s work among his Chosen People.

There are two more things to notice. Matthew concludes with the observation of order—14 generations from Abraham to David; 14 generations from David to the Exile; and 14

generations from the Return, until Jesus is born. Now, Matthew probably knew—he had Jewish history before him—that there were more generations than this in these periods, but he is making a theological statement here: God has a plan. The God of order has been working on this plan for centuries.

And what's with the women here? Why are women in a genealogy? Well, what do these women have in common? Each one lives out a life that is unconventional, and might be somewhat embarrassing. Tamar—do you know her story? It's in Genesis 38. A daughter-in-law sleeps with her father-in-law so that she can give birth and continue the family line. Hmm. What about Rahab? Her story is in the early chapters of Joshua; she's a prostitute who hides Hebrew spies (sparing their lives), and when the Hebrews later take her city of Jericho, she is spared in turn. Ruth—she left her kindred and country, and God provided her a sexual opportunity with Boaz. And who's the woman simply referred to as “Uriah's wife” in verse 6? That's Bathsheba, with whom King David had an affair and then had her husband killed so that he could take her in as HIS wife.

Jesus' family tree has some heroes, and some scoundrels—including these women. Now, isn't that a bit shocking? Jesus, the Son of God (as Christians claim), the Savior of the World and our Lord (as we say)—doesn't it sully his reputation that these characters contribute to his coming? Matthew must not think so. So if these people are not an embarrassment, why are they there? Well, for one thing, they show that God is not confined to conventional morality. God uses people who don't know Him—even some who work against Him—to bring about His purposes. Perhaps THIS is why Matthew is careful to include them. Maybe there is a characteristic here that will show forth in the life of the adult Jesus—an impatience with convention when it gets in God's way. In business school language, sometimes “the good” gets in the way of “the best”, and God will not be stopped, even if it seems downright scandalous to us. Jesus was accused of operating that way, and it drove nuts the proper religious people of his day. We'll have to watch for this in the weeks ahead.

With this background of Jesus' Family Tree, let's now listen for God's voice in the account of Jesus' birth, as we continue in Matthew 1, starting at verse 18. *[text]*

Now THIS sounds more Christmas-y, doesn't it? But wait a minute. The tour we just took through the genealogy of Jesus ought to make is very sensitive to this little drama between Joseph and Mary. They are promised to each other—betrothed. But this is more than “being engaged”, as we do that in our culture. To be “promised” in that culture meant that the two families, or clans, had already worked out a series of agreements that accompanied a new couple. A dowry had already been paid—so many sheep, so much money, or whatever. The “bans” had been announced—the clans had gone public with this promise. Joseph and Mary were much more married than just the “engagement” custom in our culture. This is clear from the language of verse 19; Joseph was going to dismiss her, send her away—whatever your translation says, this was a divorce. You can't have a divorce unless there is already a marriage contract. This looked like it was going to be shorter than a Britney Spears marriage!

And if you think Britney (or her sister's) life is a scandal, imagine what Joseph and Mary would face back in their village. Mary would be sent back to her father's home in disgrace, and could even be stoned by the villagers—for surely she would be suspected of adultery. Joseph would live with ridicule for the rest of his life.

Joseph, of course, is going to do the legal thing; that's the convention in situations of such shame; but he's going to do more than just the conventional, legal move. He's keeping this

quiet. He doesn't want to—unlike most of the people of the area—expose Mary to public shame and worse. I'm not sure what the options were, but Joseph is looking for a creative solution.

Then God breaks in, through a dream. (THIS Joseph is like the youngest son of Patriarch Jacob—they both have dreams from God, and they follow the directions they are given.) Joseph was going to go 'way beyond the Law of Moses. But God is going to ask Joseph to go even further than he had planned. "Take Mary home as your wife," says the angel (or messenger of God). "This is God's child, God's from conception. When he is born, give him the name, 'Jahweh Saves'—yes, that's to be his name. You'll call him Yeshua, or Joshua, or Jesus. But the name points to the center of his character; he will save his people from their sins that block their life-connection with God."

The angel continues, "This is to fulfill what the Prophet Isaiah said (and we find recorded in Isaiah 7:14): 'The young woman will be pregnant and give birth to a son, and name him Immanuel, which means, "God with us".'" THIS Joseph, like the Joseph of old, chooses to do this. He gives up his rights. He lowers himself in others' eyes. He is faithful, even if he breaks convention out of compassion. God takes Joseph's compassion, and crowns it by taking it into His purpose that has been brewing for centuries!

What's going on here? Surprise after surprise, and we've not even finished Matthew's first chapter! What other surprises await us, as we get to know the adult Jesus? Stay tuned.

Now, this is all well and good, but so what? It's a nice story, but it's traditional at the time of year, and we've heard it many times before, and ... well, you fill in what's on your mind.

God won't let us off that easy.

The other text for today is the opening greeting of Paul's letter to Christians at Rome. So find Romans 1, and listen CLOSELY for what God might be saying to US this morning. *[text]*

We're reading an ancient letter, and these letters followed a conventional form. They always started, "from X, writing to Y, Greetings" And in fact, most letters say that, word for word. But Paul's opening is different. He spends most of the address writing about himself. Scholars think that was because he didn't personally know most of the people to whom he was writing; he had not been to Rome yet (though he would get there, through another creative act of God—but I digress). Paul introduces himself as a slave to Christ. He introduces himself as an apostle, someone set apart for taking the good news about Christ Jesus (promised long before in the prophets like Isaiah) and now fulfilled. Jesus, Paul writes, is the Son of God, and a descendant of David—both divine and human. And, Paul says, his call is a special one—to take this message to Gentiles—that's us, the non-Jews—so that we could believe and obey God, too, as the first believers in Jerusalem were doing. We are called to belong—to also become slaves—to Jesus Christ.

Oh. Now we're beyond Jesus in the manger. Paul is talking about us. We are to be slaves to Jesus, doing as he commands. Or we'd better not call ourselves Christians, Christ-followers. //

That's a very different paradigm than most people have about God and how God operates. Most people who believe in God (and there are many in this country who say they do) are used to praying to God when they need something, and they expect God will hop off like THEIR servant, to fix or create or comfort, so that we can get back to a normal, comfortable life.

It's like the famous theology professor Mark Twain, who once said, "God created humankind in His own image, as Genesis says. And we seem stuck on returning the favor!"

What if God is an unconventional being, freely bending rules and going around human obstructions to bring love to the world, to call us to Him as new and remade people? What if God is not OUR SERVANT, but we are HIS Servants? Then, instead of promoting our agenda, we are at work on His agenda, with Him. That's what God is telling us, through Matthew's gospel and Paul's letter to Rome.

What do you guess is under your Christmas tree this year? The usual gifts? Maybe a minor surprise?

God wants to give everyone in the world a God-Sized Gift—HIMSELF. He showed us what that looks like, in Jesus. He points it at us, this morning, through Paul who brings us the Christ-gospel.

One more item. This is not a solo act. Yes, I know, in our culture, we tend to think of individuals coming to Christ, being saved. But if that's all we see, we miss another huge part of the story—God binding believers together in Christ-communities, what we call "the church". If that were more true, then every church might well be called "Immanuel Church". Every church would be a living laboratory of love, a refuge and a training academy. Every church would be "God With Us", for people who rubbed up against us would experience God.

Play with THAT for a minute. //

You-all, with me, could be the Christmas gift the people of this part of Placer County need most. Not just handing out "Jesus junk", but living a life that brings God's love into the lives of people, calling them to join with us in the Great Adventure—God's work of saving people from their sins, and releasing them to be better than they could ever be on their own, with us, with Jesus, in Jesus, for Jesus.

Christmas, Christ among us and with us for others—that's the God-Sized Gift to the world God loves, one person at a time.

Is it all sewn up—my life?

Is it at this point so predictable,

so orderly,

so neat,

so arranged

so right,

that I don't have time or space

for listening for the rustle of angels' wings

or running to stables to see a baby?

Could this be what he meant when he said

Listen, those who have ears to hear . . .

Look, those who have eyes to see?

O God, give me the humbleness of those shepherds

who saw in the cold December darkness

the Coming of Light

the Advent of Love!

--Ann Weems, "To Listen, To Look" from her books of poems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California
on December 23, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]