

The First Sunday after Christmas Day

December 27, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Years B & C: Isaiah 61:10–62:3; Psalm 147:13–21; Galatians 3:23–25, 4:4–7;

*Matthew 1:18–25**

Angels and dreams appear early, in what for us Christians, is the first book of the Old Testament, Genesis. At the end of the second creation story, “[The LORD God] drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword . . . to guard the way to the tree of life.”¹ The patriarch Jacob’s son Joseph not only dreamed dreams about his future but he could interpret the dreams of others.

In Matthew, an angel speaks to a later Joseph five times in dreams. He will be the legal but not the physical father in Matthew’s story. His obedience to God’s words will save the child from the soldiers Herod sends to Bethlehem²—in Matthew, the city where Joseph and Mary live.³ Matthew does not know a story about Joseph and Mary living in Nazareth and journeying to Bethlehem to take part in a census.⁴ They go to Nazareth after the flight to Egypt and the death of Herod, a final dream for Joseph will bring them to Nazareth.⁵

Matthew begins his gospel with the genealogy of Jesus’ legal descent from Abraham the Patriarch and David the King to Joseph. Luke gives Jesus’ genealogy after Jesus is baptized by John. Then in Luke, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in bodily form, as a dove, and “a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”⁶

¹ Genesis 3:24.

² Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 30.

³ Raymond E. Brown, *A Coming Christ in Advent: Essays on the Gospel Narratives for the Birth of Jesus (Matthew 1 and Luke 1)* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988), 8.

⁴ Luke 2:1–7.

⁵ Matthew 2:19–23.

⁶ Luke 3:22. NRSV

Luke and Matthew's genealogies have different purposes. Matthew's focus is on Jesus as the unfolding of God's purposes for his people. Luke has a larger sense of God's mission from the beginning for all people to know him and serve him. For Luke, Jesus is not the only son God has had. Luke's genealogy concludes, with these three names, "the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God."⁷ Matthew's gospel concludes with the risen Jesus saying to the eleven, "Go . . . make disciples of all nations . . . I am with you always, to the close of the age."⁸ Luke also wrote what became early on a second book, the Acts of the Apostles, the account of the mission to all nations.⁹

Matthew's genealogy concludes with these words, "So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.

There is a significant scholarly debate about whether the next verse should begin with what we heard, "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way" or without the name of Jesus: "Now the birth of the Christ"—that is, the Messiah—the Anointed—"took place in this way."¹⁰ It turns out that there is a definite article here that probably should not be there. In his book *The Birth of the Messiah*, Raymond Brown put this instance of "Jesus" in brackets. He wrote, "There is no other uncontested instance in the [New Testament] of an article"—the—"preceding the compound [Jesus Christ], a difficulty that disappears if [Jesus] is omitted."¹¹

If omitted, the name Yeshua—Joshua—Jesus—is revealed first to Joseph in his dream, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their

⁷ Luke 3:38.

⁸ Matthew 28:19–20.

⁹ François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine Thomas, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 1.

¹⁰ Matthew 1:18.

¹¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, Updated ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 123.

sins.”¹² But before this happens, Matthew can’t wait. Mary is not yet in Joseph’s house. The child is not yet born, but the evangelist must write, “All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel’ (which means, God with us).”¹³

These words are from the Greek manuscript of Isaiah, not the Hebrew, where the word here means “young woman,” its masculine form, “young man.”¹⁴ It’s worth noting that in 2011, the Roman Catholic’s *New American Bible Revised Edition*—it’s known by its initials, I believe, as “NABRE”—N–A–B–R–E—allowed the word in this verse in Isaiah to be translated from the Hebrew, and not the Greek.

One other thing that was real surprise for me when I checked this Bible was this note on the final verse, “Until [Mary] bore a son: the evangelist is concerned to emphasize that Joseph was not responsible for the conception of Jesus. The Greek word translated “until” does not imply normal marital conduct after Jesus’ birth, nor does it exclude it.”¹⁵ Those last words in the footnote reminded me of the words Father Smith quoted on Christmas Day from the late Canadian poet Leonard Cohen, “There’s a crack in everything; that’s how the light gets in.”¹⁶

Another reason to hear Matthew’s story of Jesus’ birth today is what happens next: the sign of the star and the arrival of the magi—Persian astrologers—who are led by a star to Jerusalem. Of course, this is always the gospel for Epiphany. It’s generally conceded that Matthew wrote for a Jewish Christian community at a time when the Gentile community was growing, and the growth would continue. In a different way from Luke, Matthew proclaims that you didn’t have to be in Galilee or Judea to know

¹² Matthew 1:20–21.

¹³ Matthew 1:22–23.

¹⁴ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version, Expanded Edition*, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 831 n.14.

¹⁵ Matthew 1:25 n. NABRE (2011).

¹⁶ <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/leonardcohen/anthem.html>, (accessed 27 December 2020).

God was acting and revealing God's will for humankind in the lives of men and women everywhere. As today, in our lives, in our words and deeds God is here sharing the food of faith and fellowship that sustains God's children.

Merry Christmas.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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