

## **Christmas at Matthew's House**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

03 December 2023

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Texts: Matthew 1:1-17

Matthew 2:1-12, 19-23

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

~ Matthew 1:1

### **Prayer**

**God-who-loves-stories, we give you thanks for the story of Christmas.**

**As we prepare to celebrate the miracle of Bethlehem once again,**

**Be our companion on our journey to the manger.**

**May the words of the evangelists inspire us**

**To offer up our hearts and our whole selves to Christ,**

**The child of Mary, Joseph's adopted son, your all-embracing love in human flesh.**

**Amen.**

The stone in my hand may look like nothing more than a chunk of granite rock cut into a cube to you. Every time I hold it though, I feel as if I were holding a tiny and very sacred piece of my family's story in my own hands.

Last June, my mother turned 80 and to celebrate her birthday, we traveled to Cidadelhe, a Portuguese village located in the Douro River valley, known as the oldest demarcated wine region in the world, to visit the Catholic church where one of my maternal great-grandfathers was baptized in 1869.

I did not expect to have such a strong emotional reaction when my mother and I touched the front doors of St. Vincent's Church together. The church building was closed, so we were not able to go inside to see the baptismal font where my great-grandfather received the waters of baptism as an infant. Thanks to well-kept church records, my brother was able to trace that side of the family back to the mid-1600's. For at least 3 centuries, some of my ancestors lived in those hills and worked on that land. When I stood at the weathered church doors looking over the valley and surrounded by hillsides covered with vineyards, with my arm around my mother who was about to turn 80, I felt a profound connection with my family's history. It was as if I were standing on a sacred site that allowed my mother and me to reclaim a sense of belonging that had been broken or lost. We knew that part of our genetic lineage comes from that valley in northern Portugal, but in that sacred moment by the church doors I became more fully aware of the generational and spiritual link between my great-grandfather, my mother and me.

I looked around and imagined my great-grandfather playing in the narrow streets of the village below. I marveled at the thought of a boy who was raised in those hills dreaming of a life across the Atlantic and how my existence is shaped by my great-grandfather's daring spirit, his courage, imagination and his willingness to go to a continent on which none of his family members had ever set foot. I thought about the life journey of a man I never met and how his failures and achievements, his heartaches and joys, his struggles and choices, his mistakes and wisdom, his loves and faith somehow still run through my blood and give me life. I did not plan to have an encounter with the sacred in Cidadelhe, but as writer Phil Cousineau wrote, "***The sacred, in its various guises as holy ground, art, or knowledge, evokes emotion and commotion.***"<sup>1</sup> At the door of a historic church where my great-grandfather was baptized, I unintentionally walked into a sacred borderland where the holy met the ordinary, history overlapped with a moment in time, and I was overcome by the sacredness of all the stories that still make my life real, possible and viable.

Before we left, Erik picked up this stone from a small pile of Portuguese granite cubes that were stacked up on the terrace of the church. The stone has a new home now in my home. I keep it on the top of a bookcase in the living room. Every time I see or touch it, I feel that I am reconnecting with a story bigger than my own and that I am not only rediscovering who I am but also reimagining who I can become, which is something life-giving, because, oddly enough, these encounters with the sacred never leave us completely unchanged. They always make us go through the much-needed commotion of inner transformation.

During this Advent season, we are visiting the houses of the four Gospel writers to see how they decorate for Christmas, what kind of traditions they cherish, and how each one of them frames the story about the beginning of the Good News or the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is our own pilgrimage back to the spiritual homes that connect us to the stories that nurture our faith, give us purpose, and keep the church curious, open-minded, and willing to rediscover who we are while re-imagining what kind of community of Jesus-followers we can and should become if we are truly ready to let our sacred time with the evangelists change us.

Last Sunday, we hung around Mark's house. The first of the four writers who committed to recording the story of Jesus in writing skipped over Mary's virginal pregnancy, went past Bethlehem, said nothing about angels speaking to Joseph in a dream, and avoided the birth narratives we find in Matthew and Luke altogether. There are no Christmas decorations in Mark's house. What counts for the writer of the first and shortest Gospel is what Jesus says and does after he is baptized in the river Jordan and grows into his identity as God's beloved Son. The cross, the nails, the crown of thorns and the empty tomb are the only decorations that matter to Mark. In Mark's Gospel, which many New Testament scholars describe as a passion narrative with an extended introduction, if there is any Good News in the crib is because it is found first on the cross and the resurrection.

In Matthew's house, on the other hand, Christmas is steeped in tradition. Every ornament, tablecloth, candle, wreath, and wall decor holds a unique story behind it. Rather than a traditional Christmas tree, Matthew sets up a tree very similar to the one my sister-in-law puts up every Christmas. Flávia decorates a small tree with handmade ornaments of different sizes, shapes and colors, each bearing the names of every person in hers and my brother's families. She calls it a family tree and the names on the tree go as far back as our grandparents. When we look at Flávia's family tree, it is impossible not to remember how the present is intricately woven with the threads of the past with all its colorful complexities. Matthew's house is definitely a house with a past where there are skeletons in the closet and family secrets that many would rather forget but that the Gospel writer insists on bringing up during the Christmas celebration.

We do not know who wrote the Gospel of Matthew. The early Church ascribed the book to the tax-collector Matthew whom Jesus called to be his disciple and, later, appointed as one of the twelve apostles. The truth however is that the identity of the writer remains a mystery. What we do know is that this individual we call Matthew was the second person to undertake the task of writing a theological biography of Jesus. And it is clear that the author relied heavily on Mark's Gospel to craft his own work, but Matthew was not satisfied with the brevity and simplicity of the first book about Jesus.

Matthew was writing in the wake of a time of great violence, suffering, uncertainty, and fear for the Jews who were living in the Middle East. Rome had finally quelled the Jewish revolt against the Empire in the year 70 C.E.. Jerusalem was sacked, hundreds of people were killed, the Temple was destroyed and the survivors became refugees in other parts of the Empire and beyond. Rome wouldn't allow any Jew to remain in Jerusalem. Everything Jewish appeared to have vanished from the face of the earth. Christians of Jewish background that escaped Jerusalem found themselves spiritually homeless. Their commitment to practice the teachings of Jesus made them unwelcome in synagogues where the religious leaders were understandably eager to salvage what had been left of Second Temple Judaism. Romans and Jews had also begun to question Mary's reputation, the legitimacy of her claim that Jesus was God's Son and the veracity of Jesus' whole life story. In that moment fraught with doubt, when all hope seemed to have been lost, Matthew decided that his community had to reconnect with Christmas. They had to be reminded that the Child of Mary whom Joseph named Jesus was "Emmanuel" – God-with-us.

We can imagine Palestinian Christians holding on to these words that Matthew wrote some 1,900 years ago, Christ-is-God-with-us even when all hope seems lost, as they prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ in the crosshairs of one of the most powerful militaries in the world fully equipped with American bombs, tanks, weapons, and bullets. The number of lives lost in Gaza is staggering: at least 2 mothers killed every day. An average of 146 children killed or seriously wounded a day. More than 15,000 Palestinians killed in less than 30 days. Seventy percent of the dead in the Gaza strip are women and children. James Elder, the Spokesperson for UNICEF, described the situation in Gaza as a

mass graveyard for children. You and I should care about what is happening to the children and the people of Gaza. Honestly, it should not make the slightest difference if the children who are dying in the Middle East are Christians, Muslims or Jewish, as followers of Christ, the Child of Mary, who chose to die but never to kill for peace, we live by Matthew's version of the Christmas story which declares unapologetically that Christ is God-with-us! "Us" as in a universal us. This is an "us" that the Gospel of Matthew insists is not a Jewish "us" or a Christian "us" but a human "us." Christmas in Matthew's house is celebrated as the fulfillment of God's promise made to Abraham that God's blessings, love, and peace are not just for some of us but for all humanity.

This is why Matthew made the brilliant decision to begin his account of Jesus' life with a family tree. The Gospel of Mark begins the story with a grownup Jesus receiving the waters of baptism in the river Jordan, but Matthew claims that the story of Christmas began with Abraham. To prove it, the writer pieced together the genealogy of Jesus. The Greek word translated as "genealogy" is in fact "*genesis*." Matthew wanted his community to know from the moment they started reading his Gospel that Jesus' genesis, his very beginning was firmly rooted in God's covenant with the people of Israel. Even though Matthew does not hide the fact that Jesus was not biologically related to Joseph, the evangelist honors Joseph's bold choice to adopt Mary's Child as his own. And this is an amazing part of Jesus' beginning because it tells us that God knows what it is like to have to trust someone else to love your child. God knows what it is like to put your child up for adoption. And so Matthew presents Jesus as a direct descendant of Abraham and Jacob and David and Solomon and all those people and kings who played a key role in Israel's history.

In the ancient world, biographies often included genealogies to establish a lineage of wealth, power, prestige, distinct bloodline and divine favor one had inherited. The many different biographies of Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor at the time that Jesus was born, spoke of miraculous conceptions, divine calling and Caesar's mission to bring good news of peace to the world. But Matthew did something no one was expecting to read in a genealogy of a human being who is supposed to be God in human flesh, he lifts up four women in Jesus' lineage. Three of them, Matthew mentions by name: Tamar, Rahab and Ruth. The fourth, he only refers to her as "***the wife of Uriah***," but every single one of Matthew's readers knew that he was talking about Bathsheba.

These four women shared a few things in common. None of them were Jewish. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanite; Ruth was from Moab; and Bathsheba was Hittite at least by marriage. All four of them had to fight fiercely to secure their place in society and in Israel's history. Tamar dressed up as a prostitute to trick her father-in-law to spend the night with her so she would not be cast out after two of Judah's sons to whom Tamar was married died, leaving her without a child. Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho who hid the Hebrew spies in her house and had her life spared by the invading Hebrew army. Ruth, at her mother-in-law's instruction, sneaked onto Boaz's bed and forced him to marry her. And Bathsheba was a victim of King David's lust. History defined Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and

Bathsheba by their sexual encounters with men, but in Jesus' genealogy they are an integral part of God's perfect plan – that's what the number 14 means in Jesus's genealogy: perfection – to make Christmas happen on earth. Matthew could have listed the well-known and esteemed women of Israel's history like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, instead the author chose to name the Gentile women with complicated stories not only to remind those questioning Mary's reputation of their family tree but, especially, to show that Christmas includes those who many of us would rather forget, overlook, dismiss and exclude. In Matthew's house, Christmas makes people want to re-imagine the world as a place where humankind is no longer divided between insiders and outsiders, where the life of a Palestinian kid and an Israeli citizen are equally sacred and not one single human life is ever discarded as collateral damage by warmongering politicians.

In fact, Matthew gives outsiders a place of honor at his Christmas celebration. There is no manger in Matthew's nativity set; no imperial census that forces Joseph to travel with his very pregnant fiancée to Bethlehem; no shepherds with their flocks in the field; and no docile-looking sheep and oxen at the stable. There are however men and possibly women of knowledge who come from the east to visit Joseph and Mary's child in their home in Bethlehem. We call these visitors "magi," but they were most likely astrologers from Persia, or the closest thing to a scientist at the time. These outsiders are capable of doing what King Herod in Jerusalem cannot, they see the birth of Christ as a sign of hope that can be embraced by people from different backgrounds, cultures and religions. We don't know if the wisemen ever became followers of Christ, probably not, but Matthew welcomes them into his Christmas story anyway and shows that God's family is made up of many more kinds of people than his Jewish Christian community could dream of or imagine.

Christmas at Matthew's house connects ancient stories and familiar traditions with a new hope for a world where rather than being caught up in our own shopping, traveling plans, and family preparations for Christmas, those of us who embrace the story of Jesus' birth are ready to allow God's promise to bless all the families of the earth to happen through our actions, our voices, our votes and our willingness to welcome outsiders and strangers into our lives. Matthew's Gospel does not deny that the world can be and often is a violent place. After Jesus' birth, the people of Bethlehem did not experience peace on earth but the brutality of a political leader that was willing to sacrifice the lives of countless innocent children to secure his power over the land. Like Moses in Israel's history, the baby Jesus was saved and taken to Egypt. Later, he was brought back to Palestine to fulfill his mission to heal the divisions in human history, to mend the brokenness of the human heart, to remind humankind of our deep longing for peace, to free our minds so we may dream dreams of human solidarity rather than acquiesce to the perverse realism of those who say that outsiders can never become guests at our table, to give us hope when all hope is gone, to lead us from death to life. In Matthew's house, Christmas is a sacred moment that evokes emotions and commotion. The story of Jesus' birth comforts us with its message of hope, but it also creates discomfort because Christmas in Matthew makes us aware that something in us and in human history needs attention, needs healing, needs

to be transformed so the promise to Abraham that was fulfilled in Christ may become true – that all the families of the earth, especially those families and children in places of violence and war, may be blessed with peace.

Friends, I hope that Christmas in Matthew's house will create a commotion in your hearts. I hope when you leave this place, you ask yourself: how can this simple story link me to Jesus' genesis, to the Good News of his birth, so you may be a blessing to the nations and to all the families of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Phil Cousineau in The Art of Pilgrimage, p. 119.