

## Home by a Different Way

After preaching for nearly thirty years I find that I have a lot of sermons. That's both a strength and a drawback. I've said a lot of things about a lot of Bible passages, so that knowledge is there if I need it. On Thanksgiving Day, for instance, there were so few people that we sat in the choir stalls in the chancel. That meant that instead of preaching from a text in the pulpit I could choose to do it extemporaneously, which worked because I knew what I was going to say. The drawback is that with certain Bible passages I find myself going back to the same ideas again and again.

Today I'm more aware of the drawback than the strength. I've already said all of the usual things about today's readings. I've pointed out how drawn-out is the beginning of Paul's letter to the Romans. Instead of just saying "Paul, to God's beloved in Rome," he includes a mini-sermon detailing his credentials, what he preaches, and how the people he's writing to fit into that. I've mentioned how odd it is to hear Matthew's story of Jesus' birth on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, a week before Christmas Day. I've talked about Matthew's special focus on Greek-speaking Jewish believers, quoting the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible called the Septuagint. That's how Isaiah's Hebrew word for "young woman" became the Greek work for "virgin," which got into our English translations. I've commented on Joseph being the main actor in Matthew's story of Jesus' birth. God speaks to him in dreams just like the Joseph in Genesis. I've already said all of that in past sermons. So now what?

At least Matthew's perspective on the birth comes only once every three years. Luke's version is the one that shows up every Christmas Eve. That's why we're likely to slip in details from one to flesh out the other. It becomes what is sometimes called a gospel harmony, one big story that includes everything. So every three years it's worthwhile to take a moment and look at things the way Matthew sees them.

For one thing, we hear right off the bat that Jesus is the Messiah. Actually, Matthew said that in the verse just before today's passage, at the end of the genealogy of Jesus (which, incidentally, differs from Luke's genealogy.) Matthew leaves no doubt about the identity of this child. Nor is there any question about what he will do. He is going to save his people from their sins. That's why he's given the name Jesus, derived from a Hebrew word to save. He will also be called Emmanuel, "God with us," the one whom Isaiah predicts.

Saying all of this up front will give structure to the rest of Matthew's Gospel. As 21<sup>st</sup>-century Christians we think "of course he's the Messiah. No surprise there!" But if you were a first-century Jew your reaction would more likely be, "Prove it." That's exactly what Matthew sets out to do in the next twenty-eight chapters.

Here he also presents his themes. Joseph is as righteous a man as his Genesis namesake. The Holy Spirit is present in the child before birth. It has all been planned out by God. If we consider what the text is saying, the message is pretty clear. The child conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit fulfills the Scriptures. Jesus is the fulfillment of all that God promised to his people.

I once heard Bishop Epting say that having the same Bible readings again and again creates a circle. But we have moved on since the last time we heard them, so it's really more of a spiral. I like that. I hope my spiral is going upward toward God. It does make me wonder where this passage intersects with my life now, on *this* Fourth Sunday of Advent.

Certainly the life and work of Jesus have not changed. He continues to save us from our sins and is with us even now. Matthew's narrative, however, is the one where we find the visit of the Magi after the birth. That really resonates with me at this moment in my life. Like them, I have come from the East to worship Jesus for a time here at Trinity Cathedral. And like them, I will soon depart and go home another way. You, and Jesus, will still be here.

One Bible verse that keeps returning to me often these days is from the Letter to the Hebrews rather than a Gospel: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (13:8). That has been true ever since that young woman – or virgin – conceived and bore a son. We change, the world changes, but Christ does not. He is the foundation of all we believe, and the promise of hope to come.

Ironically, a week from today, on Christmas Day itself, we won't hear any birth narratives. Those come the night before, on Christmas Eve. Instead we'll hear the Prologue to John's Gospel, those eighteen verses that set the story of Jesus Christ not in human time, but in cosmic time, God's time. At least I know I'll never run out of things to say about that passage. Who can ever say enough about God?

[Advent 4: Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25.]