

Christmas in the Gospels *Matthew's Family Tree*

Matthew 1:18-25

December 10, 2023

Last week, we began the season of Advent in Mark's wilderness. It was a stark scene. No large crowds gathered. No lights hung in trees. Indeed, no trees. Only a few simple words that capture the good news of Christmas: *You are my child. I love you.*

This Sunday, we come to Matthew's Christmas celebration. And this week, the whole family is there, and I mean the *whole family*. It's a reunion of Joseph's folks, beginning with Father Abraham and Mother Sarah. Abraham is Joseph's great great great (x40) grandfather, after all. King David is there over in the corner by himself, and that's an important part for Matthew. Joseph was part of a royal line—descendent of the house of Israel's greatest king, David. In fact, the whole family tree features a who's who of Old Testament figures, all leading up to Joseph and then to that baby—that baby in the center of the party. Except. Here's the awkward moment at the family reunion. Joseph's kid...well, he's not Joseph's kid. At least not in the usual sense.

Perhaps you remember the opening line of Leo Tolstoy's classic novel *Anna Karenina*. The book begins with this sentence: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Though Tolstoy lived and wrote in the late nineteenth century, his description is appropriate for any era of human history. Families—your family, my family, Joseph's family—families are complicated, conflicted, often downright uncomfortable.

Scott Black Johnston is the pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. His congregation sits five blocks north of Rockefeller Center, where each year, as you know, they light a

massive Christmas Tree. Crowds of people from all around the world come to see it. Scott reports that according to the chief gardener at Rockefeller Center, the search for that particular tree takes all year and covers the entire United States, scouts sent out to all fifty states in search of the perfect tree. The final ninety-foot-tall candidate is chosen for its ideal shape, its perfect color, its breathtaking majesty. In the chief gardener's words: "*This tree can have no bad sides.*"

Well, if like us you've scoured the available choices in a parking lot or a tree farm, you know just how difficult that task must be. The Saturday after Thanksgiving, our family drove out to Piney Acres Farm in Fortville, Indiana. We were in search of the perfect Christmas tree. Ideal shape. Perfect color. Breathtaking majesty. We began our search with great hope, high spirits, lots of energy. An hour later, we had narrowed our search, but consensus was elusive. Each of our boys had a favorite, and they stood next to their favorite tree arguing the merits of their selection. Neither was willing to budge. Ultimately, it was only the prospect of hot chocolate that led to compromise.

Here's the truth: every tree has a bad side. Or several. At our house, we have a strategy for that. I bet you do as well. We put the tree in the corner. We turn it just right to conceal all those blemishes. We hide the imperfections under carefully hung ornaments and Christmas lights.

This is not Matthew's approach. The family tree at the center of his Christmas story is not without fault or imperfection, and Matthew puts the whole thing on full display. I spared you the begats that begin this chapter, but there are seventeen verses

of them. Yes, great figures of the Old Testament, but also spies, traitors, homeless foreigners. There are several outsiders and newcomers. There are stories of struggle and survival and sin. *David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah.* Now look, Matthew, did we really need to include that particular scandal? The one nobody would ever mention at the Christmas party—nobody except Matthew. The great King David was not a portrait of piety, certainly not perfection. Why does Matthew insist on putting the bad side of the tree right out front?

Several years ago, in another city, I was preparing to conduct a memorial service for the grandmother of a church member. In our meeting to plan the service, I had been warned by members of the family that the woman had a daughter, and that her daughter had been estranged from the family, from her siblings, for many, many years. Poor decisions and harsh words had characterized her relationship, and her siblings weren't even sure she would come to the service. If she did, they were sure she would sit in the back of the sanctuary. I think it fair to say they were afraid of what might happen if she did come. Just before the service, as the family gathered in my office, one of the ushers quietly knocked on my office door and then pried it open. A woman walked into the office, and I immediately knew that she was the estranged sister. I knew it because of the rising tension I could feel in the room. She just stood there in the doorway. She looked at her family, and then she looked at the floor. The silence was overwhelming. And I was just about to make a bumbling remark about the weather, but something held my tongue. We stood in silence until finally the eldest brother walked over. Still no words, but he wrapped his arms around his sister's shoulders. He was a tall man, and he leaned down and kissed her on the top of her head. And as he did, he motioned for the rest of the family to join the circle. And they did, tearfully. I'm not sure I've ever seen a clearer picture of the power of forgiveness than the one I witnessed as four siblings walked, arms locked with each other, out of my office to honor their mother's life.

Here is what Matthew wants you to know about Christmas. God is in the middle of the mess we make and the chaos that characterizes our lives.

God is in the middle of the mess. Which brings us back to Joseph there at the family reunion. We meet him at a moment of crisis. The weight of the world is on his shoulders. His fiancée is pregnant. The baby is not his. He wants to do the right thing. He is contemplating, as the gospel puts it, "dismissing Mary quietly." He is hoping that the scandal won't pursue him for the rest of his life. That's his best plan, the only one that comes to mind. A quiet goodbye. Perhaps another shot at a happy family. That is, until Joseph receives an unlikely visitor. Like his Old Testament ancestor of the same name, he receives shocking news from a sacred source. In the dream, the angel encourages Joseph to proceed with the wedding, to accept the baby on the way, to give that child a name. The angel asks Joseph to adopt Jesus.

Matthew records what comes next as if it was the most natural response in the world, the most likely series of events. Joseph wakes up from his dream. He does what the angel says. He takes Mary as his wife. She gives birth to a son, and Joseph names him Jesus. Now, there are a few gaps in this story that I would love to have filled. For starters, what did they tell grandma?

These details fade against the significance of what has just happened. Joseph courageously accepts his God-given call. He musters the faith to believe the promise that has presided over his family since Father Abraham and Mother Sarah first heard the voice of God say, "You have been adopted. *You* have been adopted, included, welcomed." Matthew wants us to know that Christmas was possible because an ordinary man believed that God was with him in the middle of the mess, and that God would expand his family in astounding ways.

In fact, from this moment on, the movement of the Spirit keeps growing the family of God. In the very next chapter, we have this group of Gentiles,

foreigners, star-seekers, who follow their maps and their hearts to this holy child. And the family tree adds another branch. The circle grows a little wider.

Matthew's Christmas story teaches us that there is something far more beautiful than the perfect tree. It is a family defined by love.

If you've been around here a while, chances are you've heard me say that baptism is my favorite part of congregational ministry. That's true no matter the circumstances, but back in October we got to experience an extra special occasion when Crosby, a ten-year-old whose family has multiple generations in our congregation, was baptized here on our chancel. Crosby had made the decision himself. He wanted to be baptized, and that day he was dressed up and beaming with pride. After the service, I asked Crosby to stand at the door with me and greet you as you left the sanctuary. One of our senior members walked out and shook Crosby's hand, and I was standing close enough that I could overhear the young man say these words: "Thank you for letting me be a part of this church." And so, the family tree grew another branch.

Obedient Joseph gives his adopted son the name the angel commanded—Jesus. In this family, names matter, and this one means, "God saves." It's the promise Joseph receives and accepts. This child embodies the salvation God intends for all people. But Matthew gives us a second name for the child, and it's a good one, too. Drawn from the prophet Isaiah.

Emmanuel. God is with us. With all of us. With us in the mess. With us in the chaos. With us in the complexity and the confusion that characterize our families. With us in the crisis. With us when life is not easy and the answers are not obvious.

Listen. When your family gathers this Christmas, there will be unresolved conflict. There will be unacknowledged pain. When your family gathers this Christmas, there will be empty seats at the table. There will be stories left untold because of the

discomfort they may bring. When your family gathers for Christmas this year, someone will hold memories of harsh words spoken in the past, of love withheld.

And the Christmas message in the Gospel of Matthew is this: stop trying to hide that tree in the corner or paint over its imperfections, and prepare yourself to be amazed by the expansive love of God. Prepare to be blessed by the new members of God's family who will join you on the journey. Prepare yourself to be a part of the Spirit's surprising embrace.

After all, Joseph had a plan. It was practical and sensible. Try to make the best of a difficult situation. Try to be kind and gracious. Joseph had a plan, and then the message came. "No, you are a part of *my* plan." Emmanuel. God is with you in the middle of the mess. So make room in your heart. God is on the move. Amen.