

**Fourth Sunday of Advent (a)**  
**Isaiah 7:10-16 Romans 1:1-7 Matthew 1:18-25**  
**Saint John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH**  
**December 18, 2022 (Contemporary)**

Right before today's gospel reading, Matthew, the gospel writer, starts his gospel with one of those long genealogies: Seventeen "begats" about father to son, son to son to son to son, all the way back to Abraham. You know how modern authors try to grab your attention quickly on the first page of their book, so you keep reading? Well, Matthew is obviously not trying to entertain modern Americans!

He starts with Abraham—the father of the Jewish people, and he traces each link of the historical, biological Jewish chain—father to son—all the way from Abraham to Jesus. Why is that important?

Well, Jesus, from one perspective, was a link on a historical, biological chain of people, just like you and I are links in a family chain. Matthew is reminding us that Jesus is not only the center of God's plan of salvation for all people, for all time, but also, that plan started before Jesus was born and now continues today, link by link, through people like you and me. Jesus is the fulfillment of everything God wants for you and me, but God is not changing His basic tactics, when it comes to getting the word out. He's not going to use magic. He's not going to wait for people to stumble accidentally into faith. It's still going to be up to people like Abraham, Joseph, Mary, Peter, and Paul, and you and me, to get the message out. Pass it on link by link to the next person...on to our friends, our coworkers, our kids...on to the next generation.

That comes out real strong. But at the same time, he's clearly telling us that Joseph is *not* really the father of this new baby. Jesus is a continuation of God's saving plan, but at the same time, he is a break from everything that's come before him. Jesus is *so very, very much more*. It helps to picture Jesus as not only a link in the chain of God's continuing plan, horizontally in human history; He is now the direct vertical link between God and every human being in the chain, from beginning to end. This baby is the final link—the vertical link who will hold everything together—past, present and future. And every person of any time who ever believes in him: he will bring us all to God through His death and resurrection. This baby, who was born out back in a shed, is how God will bring his amazing plan of love to completion.

I like how the message about this baby comes to Joseph in a dream; it happens when he's passive, asleep...when his guard is down. The angel comes and says to him: "Do not be afraid, for the child in Mary's womb is from the Holy Spirit." That announcement doesn't come from this world, but from outside. Not when Joseph is awake and in control, trying to find his own answers to his own life. It *comes to him*. He's passive. It's a total surprise, a shock. Nothing he ever could have expected.

So right from the start, at the heart of Advent and Christmas is this truth that goes directly against the flow of the world today. The current trend is to think we know everything,

we can prepare for everything, we can engineer anything—even society, even people. To gain the future we want, we just have to come up with the right plan and control all the variables that'll get us there. And now we've got technology aiding us that'll account for every possibility, we assume, in a millisecond. So it's kind of like we're living with this sense of total control all the time. Nothing can really surprise us.

But then the birth of Jesus tells us the opposite. For you and me to have a future at all, God had to mount a surprise invasion. Here we think we're in control. But we're really not. The truth is, we're creating a bigger control bubble around ourselves all the time, and we do that out of fear. With Jesus, God punctures the bubble. Jesus is God confirming to us: you're planning every little part of your lives, but you cannot make what I'm going to give you part of your plans.

This baby, and the wonder and joy of his birth, is a gift. Jesus is truly God's surprise invasion. He came without our asking, without our even reaching out to Him. He was not part of the algorithm. It happened. He was born. God is bowling us over with love, here. The first thing the message of the incarnation does is knock us out of ourselves, and our plans, and our desire for control. Just like it did Joseph. And maybe especially at this time of year, we need to be knocked out of ourselves.

So, the angel gives Joseph two names for the baby. Number One: "You shall call his name Jesus," the angel says, "for he will save his people." The Hebrew name *Jesus* is the verb, *save*. Several babies, actually, in the Old Testament are named Save. Joshua, Isaiah, Hosea. Each of them worked to save Israel from destruction, and now Jesus will save people from sin and guilt...he will save from death. Jesus will save from despair and hopelessness. Jesus will save from the spirit-crushing effects of poverty and sickness and hunger. Everything Jesus did, he did to save us. Advent is being ready for the One who came because no matter how spectacular we are, no matter how good our algorithms are, we cannot save ourselves.

His second name is Emmanuel...*God is with us*. In Jesus, God made a permanent home for himself in this world, in the flesh. The Holy Spirit will live in the temple of our bodies. And wherever Jesus goes in the gospels, new life comes. He shows up in the middle of these hopeless people, and he brings them new life...lepers, the deaf, the blind, the lame, the hungry, the unclean, even the dead. When we think of Emmanuel, where do we see, in our own lives, the presence of that resurrected, living, saving Lord who brought healing and new life wherever he went? I see him at work very often here at St. John's.

And it brings us back to Matthew's genealogy. The incarnation of Jesus makes clear: we're going to see God at work in people.

You notice, today's gospel doesn't ask us to *do* much! It invites us to get ready to be blown away—knocked off our feet—by God's grace. I think it's a basic part of Christian life—it's something that makes us different...we're expecting to be surprised every day by God's grace. And the gospel reminds us how, at those times when our world feels

unsaveable, here is the baby named *He Will Save*. Our world might look abandoned by God, corrupt, filled with a lot of lies and distortions. And we ourselves might feel abandoned sometimes, without anything really solid to trust in or count on. But here is the baby named *God with us*. Matthew is telling us: look up. Get ready to have our lives and our world changed—shaken up—by this gift from God.

Praise God...I cannot hold onto the miracle of Jesus' birth by any "goodness" in myself. Only faith can grasp it. Praise God...Christmas usurps, pushes aside any plan that I would have come up with for my life; it's different from any plan that any politician or philosopher would have come up with for the good of the world. Praise God...we can let go of our plans, and be blown away by what God has done. And we can be part of it.