

Faith & The Wonder of a Name

Second Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 5, 2021

Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating

Unlike the other Gospel writers, Matthew takes a deep dive into the waters of Jesus' ancestry. There's no DNA evidence or family Bibles to support his claims, of course, but then none of that would change the way Matthew recounts his story. It is a story cast deep into the religious traditions and imaginations of Israel – a story that about God's continuing faithfulness to Israel and to the world.

Matthew knows this story is filled with awe and wonder; he knows the names of the long cast of characters. But he also knows something else: the reason why all of it matters so very much.

Too often our experience of Christmas becomes like a photograph Tim Mooney describes in his book *Like A Child*. Mooney describes a photo taken from his local newspaper some decades ago, but it could just as easily have been taken last week. The photo shows two teenagers sitting on lawn chairs. They are surrounded by a great forest, with towering trees and canopies of evergreen branches covering them. They sit facing a giant television screen that is plugged into a massive RV. In their hands are two video game controllers. Sitting there in the center of the beauty of nature, they are playing video games, their eyes focused only on the screen. Their slouched posture conveys a sense of boredom, for they are oblivious to the wonder surrounding them.

Mooney adds, "Their minds, occupied and distracted, their souls oblivious to the surrounding awe, and mystery.¹ It makes me wonder how many times I get caught by something that attracts my attention or causes me to get distracted, while all around me is the beauty and grace of something more awesome than I could ever imagine.

Sometime in the next few days, take a moment to allow the wonder of Christmas to brush over you once more by reading the story of Jesus' birth. That story, you may remember, is only told in two of the four gospels. Mark hits the ground

¹ Mooney, "Like A Child," p. 27.

running with Jesus appearing to be baptized, while John sketches out a grander, more philosophical story of the Word made flesh. Only Luke and Matthew offer us accounts of Jesus' birth, and even their accounts differ.

While Luke frames the birth of Jesus from Mary's perspective, Matthew takes a different approach. Luke doesn't bring up the story of Jesus' lineage until after Jesus is born, while Matthew starts his gospel by delivering a long-winded account of 42 generations of Jesus' ancestry, going all the way back to Abraham. It's not likely you've heard a sermon on that genealogy, though if someone wants to volunteer to read the names of 42 generations of Jesus' ancestors, I'd be willing to give it a try.

Matthew moves across the centuries deftly, skillfully highlighting ancestors who were both rich and powerful as well weak and insignificant. Some of the greatest heroes of the Bible are included, but so are characters whose stories seem to have been forgotten. And, in a tradition dominated by men, Matthew takes pains to include five women in Jesus' ancestral lineage – Tamar, the victim of sexual violence; Rahab, reputed to have been a prostitute; Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah; Ruth, who was not a Hebrew but a foreigner; and Mary, who was not wed to Joseph when she became pregnant.

It is a story of saints and sinners. Like all of our family trees, the names run together, the notorious and the saints all filtered through the same theological funnel. I have been shaking my family tree a good bit and have found ancestors who fought in just about every war in our nation's history, including great-great grandparents who served in both the Union and Confederate Armies. One of my great-grandfathers was a Confederate deserter. I have even found a 6th great Aunt who was the mother of Thomas Jefferson's wife. I wonder if that entitles me to some sort of government benefit. There was also a Keating who was an Earl, though of what we do not know. How do these people get on these trees, and what do their names mean to us who carry strands of their genetic material hundreds of years later?

Scholars have raised all sorts of various theories about why Matthew includes these persons, but one argument seems particularly compelling. In telling us the story of "Immanuel, God with us," Matthew presents Jesus as an ancestor of David, a common Jew, a person whose family history was not just a tale of

royalty, but a story of the marginalized and weak. This is the Jesus who comes “to save his people from their sins.”

Matthew is held by the wonder of this story. And what a story it is! Matthew recounts 42 generations of names – famous, infamous, influential, forgotten. They are all there. Incredibly, in a world dominated by men, Matthew includes five women in Jesus’ genealogy—Tamar, a victim of sexual assault; Rahab, reputed to be a prostitute, the wife of Uriah, also known as Bathsheba; Ruth, who was not a Hebrew, and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Jesus, Joshua, the one who saves. In the Old Testament, Joshua, the assistant of Moses, spies out the promised land, and eventually leads the people of Israel into the land flowing with milk and honey. “You will call him Jesus,” the angel tells Joseph as he dreams. He will be the one who will deliver God’s people from their pain and hurt. You will name him Jesus.

That dream lances open the wound of Joseph’s hurt, anxiety, and disillusionment. Joseph has not been filled with joy. He is scared, probably. Resentful, perhaps. It’s complicated, as anyone who has ever found themselves surprised by unplanned pregnancy will admit. His mind races to find a way to settle this matter quietly, without bringing any more scandal to Mary.

If Mary’s song is filled with wonder and delight, then Joseph’s dreams are the stuff of run of the mill ordinary pain and struggle.

Ever since hearing of the rumors about Mary, Joseph has been gritting his teeth and dabbing his eyes. The engagement that had once seemed like a delightful dream had suddenly become a nightmare. A nightmare that always seemed to end with Joseph awakening from a fitful sleep, drenched in sweat and uneasy.

The dreams never stop. They awaken Joseph, causing him to sit straight up in bed. These are worse than the anxiety dreams you have of finding yourself sitting in a class you have somehow forgotten you were taking. You have hurried to get into your seat, but you realize you have no idea about the subject or what’s going to be on the final exam, and even worse, the teacher knows that as well.

You know the dream: your least favorite high school teacher is waiting for you to enter the room. “Nice to see you, Mr. Keating,” she says, pointing to the chair

that has been vacant all semester. And even though I graduated high school in 1980, every now and then I'll have that dream.

Joseph's dreams are not filled with wonder and astonishment, but with the cold hard facts of life. The beginning of this story of Jesus begins not with visions of sugarplums, but with the story of a mother and father facing the pain of an unplanned pregnancy. Jesus' birth, at least as Matthew tells the story, begins with what Paul would later call "sighs too deep for words."

But that is our good news.

It is our good news because Joseph's dreams turn from deepest fear to calming assurance. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife," the angel says. "She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from his sin."

That is the Good News, the reason why God has caused this commotion. It

Joseph's restless dreams could well be ours. Doctors noted an increase in patients reporting strange and wild dreams at the beginning of the pandemic. The fears and changes brought on by the pandemic resulted in a surge of dream activity worldwide as our brains raced to make sense of the worries and changes.²

It's not only the pandemic. The headlines both locally and nationally seem to make sustaining wonder and joy impossible. We are regularly faced with the dilemma which theologian G. K. Chesterton described: "How can we be at once astonished at the world, and yet at home with it?"

If you are feeling wonder deficient this Advent, I invite you to try this simple practice. Sit comfortably and take some deep breaths. Make a fist with one hand and simply notice what it is like and what feelings may arise. As you clench your fist, think of the things which cause your fear and worry. Make a mental list or choose one to focus on. And then consider: How has your mind become like a fist, closed tightly around your worries or fears? How has holding on to those fears served you and others you love?

² See <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-covid-19-pandemic-is-changing-our-dreams/> (accessed 12/4/2021)

Now open your hand slowly, as if it is beginning to form a cup. What would it mean for you to hold those worries and fears more loosely? How might the love, wonder, and grace of God fill the cup of your hand?

Do not be afraid, for he will be named Jesus, for he will save his people.