

Advent: From Matthew's Perspective

Matthew 1:1-2, 17-25; 2:1-18
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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So Matthew, I hear that you are an author, and that you're wanting to write a short book in order to share the good news of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. I know a little bit about him, like he was the founder of a radical religious and social movement within Judaism. But he was execution some 50 years ago, right? I also know that what he started has spread beyond Jerusalem and Galilee, to places like Syria, Greece, Egypt and Rome. Looks like this Christianity is growing into a new religion that even includes Gentiles.

So how are you going to begin your story? What will be your perspective, the particular angle you want to take? I understand that you will be writing this for your faith community. And it appears that your church is a congregation made up primarily of Jews who have converted to this Christianity. It's sad many were probably kicked out of the Jewish synagogue. I bet there's a lot of animosity toward the Jewish authorities. Sounds more like a family dispute among loyal and devout Jews - those who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the long-anticipated Messiah, the Christ, and those who did not believe this.

That being the case, I bet your traditions of worship and devotion are still guided by your Jewish heritage, and your scriptures, then, the Hebrew Bible. But now you find that your faith community has ventured into the uncharted waters of Christianity. As an author, I know you hope your book will help them understand the relationship between the old and the new, between the cherished traditions and commandments of your Jewish legacy and the new demands of Christian discipleship.

At first, I bet the folks in your church were probably wondering: How do we add our new faith in Jesus to our Jewish heritage? But now that you've split from the synagogue the question has almost reversed: How do we incorporate our Jewish customs and legacy into the new reality of the Christian faith? Good luck trying to make that point, that Jewish Christians throw out neither their Jewish birthright nor the law of the Torah, and that your new understanding is that Jesus the Christ fulfills rather than abolishes the Law and the Prophets. I'm still now sure what all that means.

I hear, however, that there are some folks starting to join the church that don't have a Jewish background. Incorporating Gentiles, those former pagans who converted to Christianity, is another big issue to tackle. Maybe you should let someone else who wants to be a gospel writer wrestle with that perspective. I hear that's what a guy named Mark did in his gospel. Perhaps others will, as well.

It sure seems like incorporating diversity into the church is already a big hassle. But yes you're right, that's what Jesus would do. I bet incorporating diversity will get easier as the centuries go by. But I may be wrong about that. By the way, I'm very impressed with your knowledge and highly polished use of the Greek language. You're obviously a very educated person.

Well, enough talk, I know you're anxious to get writing. But where to begin? I notice that you have in front of you that gospel book written by Mark some 10 years ago or so. That's a good resource, so is that other book of sayings you have. Someone will probably name that one "Q". I've heard Mark started his gospel with the arrival of Jesus, his advent, with the story of Jesus' baptism. But you say you want to back it up further, making a stronger connection with your church's Jewish heritage, especially making the case that Jesus is indeed the long-awaited Messiah promised and prophesized in the Hebrew scriptures.

What's that? Wow, that's a good idea, to start your gospel with a genealogy that traces back Jesus' lineage to King David, and even further back to Abraham, the founder of Judaism itself. Your readers will love this. So-and-so begat so-and-so makes for fascinating reading, because when they hear a name they'll be able to recollect the stories of that person's life. I'm sure your future readers, say thousands of years from now, will remember all this and will find this list just as exciting.

But now you need to find a way to introduce Jesus himself. Well that's a good idea, start with telling a story of his birth. I find it fascinating that the truth you want to reveal doesn't necessarily have to be historical, that your concern is more theological in nature than an actual historical biography. I'm sure people in the future will also know to how to find the meaning behind your words, and to take those words seriously, but not literally. But then again, I may be wrong about this, too.

Going back to your idea to start with a genealogy, that strategy will certainly help your Jewish converts understand that Jesus' story is simply a continuation of the story of God's people, beginning with Abraham. Now I'm starting to understand. Your purpose is to introduce Jesus as the embodiment of the heart and soul of Israel, and the fulfillment of all the hopes of that tradition. Your readers will see, then, it is Jesus who inaugurates God's kingdom right here and now with a new way of living and being, rather than in some distant point in the future. Cool.

So for those followers of Jesus in your church it means that they don't have to leave their Jewish heritage behind, but rather they can realize that Jesus is the One toward whom their tradition was always leading.

What do you plan on including in your birth narrative itself? I bet you'll have an angel announce the birth to Mary, right? No you're right, having the angel talk to Joseph fits in better with your perspective. And having Joseph find out his wife is pregnant, and that he's not the father, makes him face the moral dilemma of following the Jewish law and dismissing Mary, or realizing that God is doing a new thing in Jesus, revealing that Joseph is still being faithful and righteous in the eyes of God. Hey, that's just like the predicament of what your church is wrestling with, isn't it – being pulled by their old roots *and* their new experiences, trying to figure out if being righteous means following the old way or the new. Once this Christianity thing becomes fully established, however, I'm sure that everyone will be fine with this new tradition where the church tells them what to do and believe. Or maybe that's another thing I'll be wrong about.

Regardless, I like your point that being righteous doesn't mean looking up a rule in a book and then doing the 'right thing,' but rather wrestling with the complexities of a problem, listening for the voice of God and then doing God's thing. Guess that means our job is trying to discern what God is doing, and then joining with God to do God's work in the world. I'm sure that message won't get messed up either.

By the way, I like the way you're planning to tell your story of Jesus' birth by making the details fit all those scripture passages and prophecies that you plan on quoting from the Hebrew Bible.

So what else are you going to include? I bet it will involve Mary and Joseph making a trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, having the baby born out in a lowly stable and put in a manger, with shepherds out in their fields coming to see what has happened. No? That doesn't fit into what you're trying to get across? Then what? Really? Star-gazing astronomers or wise men coming from the East bearing gifts for Jesus? Oh, I get it, this will show how Jesus' ministry will grow to include those Gentile folks who are now converting to Christianity. Great idea.

What's that? You're going to have these magi go to Jerusalem and ask that wicked King Herod where to locate the child who has been born king of the Jews? Yikes, I bet that ticks him off, him being king and all. Hope he doesn't do anything too drastic. Oh. So it's Herod's folks that you're going to have quote the Hebrew scriptures referencing Bethlehem as the place where a ruler will be born? Then an actual star will lead the wise men and stop directly over the house where Mary and Joseph and Jesus live? That's more of your metaphorical language, isn't it!

But I get it. You want to make the point that it's both nature (the star) and scripture that leads people to learn something about God. Your right, knowing the scriptures isn't enough, after all Herod and his people know the Bible, but they missed the Messiah. Boy, I bet religious insiders won't make that mistake again. I'm sure that after people read your story that they will continue to look for God in creation, not just in the pages of a book. What? I might not be right about that one, either?

Well, I got to run, but I'd like to know how are you going to finish this part of your story? Jesus' family will escape King Herod's evil plans by going to Egypt? Doesn't that make them refugees? I bet that will lead others in the future to gladly welcome refugees into their own country. Yeah, I know, another idea that might not play out according to plan. Wait. Then doesn't that mean Jesus will have to come out of the land of Egypt into the promised land of God's people? Clever! That's the same path taken by the people of Israel when God led them through the wilderness during the exodus. Hey, doesn't that kind of make Jesus like the "new Moses"? Oh, that's your point. Everything that God called Israel to be, Jesus is.

Wow, you're writing an incredible story. And yet again, I'm sure everyone will remember your particular theological perspective in telling us about Jesus' arrival – his advent. No this time I'm sure. I can't be wrong about that many things...can I?

Amen.

Source material for this sermon:

Matthew, Thomas G. Long, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

Matthew, New Interpreter's Bible Commentary.