

Adoption

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80; Galatians 4: 4-7; Matthew 1:18-25

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Matthew says this is the story of the birth of Jesus, but I think this may be more the story of Joseph. See what you think....

The story actually begins, not here in the middle of the chapter, but at the beginning of the chapter with these words, “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” What follows is Joseph’s genealogy. The story begins with Abraham, the father of Israel, continues through David, the King of Israel, and ends with Joseph. It is Joseph’s genealogy, which, granted, would be an important piece of Jesus’ story if Jesus were Joseph’s son. But the story continues:

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Right off the bat, we find out that this child is not Joseph’s child. What difference does it make that Joseph was descended from Abraham and David? Jesus was not descended from Joseph.

The story continues: “Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.” Joseph, son of David, a man who was right with God, was engaged to Mary—engaged and already committed to her when he found out that Mary was with child from the Holy Spirit. To say that this news was alarming for Joseph would probably be an understatement. The law of Scripture indicated that in light of Mary’s pregnancy, Joseph could have Mary stoned to death. After all, this was adultery, and adultery called for capital punishment. Joseph was careful to keep the law, but Joseph would not consider having Mary stoned to death. Joseph loved Mary.

Joseph’s heart must have been breaking as he wrestled between strict adherence to the Torah and the supreme demand to love each other as God loves us. It was not out of anger that Joseph decided to dismiss Mary quietly. Rather, Joseph decided it was his religious obligation to respond to Mary’s pregnancy. Mary was apparently guilty of a sin, and it was not Joseph’s prerogative to be able to forgive her. The law, however, would allow Joseph to dismiss Mary. This is what he would do, although this action would be painful for Joseph: the annulment would put Mary in a terrible situation, leaving her to support herself and her baby on her own. At least, however, he would put her away quietly and save her the public humiliation.

The story continues:

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will

bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Just as Joseph was ready to follow the law, an angel appeared to Joseph, encouraging him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. The law certainly had no provision for Joseph’s marrying Mary. Yet Joseph knew that to be right with God is to listen for God’s directions, not tossing out the law, but listening for the possibility that God will do something new. While Joseph was a righteous man who followed the law, he would not make an idol of the law. To be a slave to the law would not make Joseph right with God. Righteousness is a gift offered out of God’s grace. In the tension between the prevailing understanding of God’s laws and the new thing that God was doing in Jesus, Joseph broke the law, married Mary, and began to make plans to adopt her child. Joseph, who was right with God, was one of the first to hear the Gospel story, “You have heard it was said..., but I say to you....” Joseph heard the Gospel story.

The story that began, “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way,” concludes “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.” While Matthew touted this as the story of the birth of Jesus, the only thing we are told about the birth of Jesus is that after Jesus’ birth Joseph and Mary began to have marital relations. Thus, Matthew’s telling of this story is as much about Joseph as it is about Jesus.

Listen again to this last part of the story. “He [Joseph] named him Jesus.” In those days, it was the role of the mother to name her child. Yet in this story it was Joseph who named the boy. In naming the baby, Joseph claimed the child as his own, showing his intention to adopt this child into his family, into the family tree of King David. And in order for the promise of an everlasting kingdom to be fulfilled through David’s line, Jesus would have to be adopted, for Jesus was not in the bloodline of Joseph. Through the encouragement of the messenger from God, Joseph did adopt Jesus, even though it was clear from the beginning that Jesus was more than the accumulated best of Joseph’s ancestors. Jesus’ conception was the work of God, a fresh new divine act, startling and heretofore unheard of. And just as his conception called attention to Jesus’ special place in history, so also did his naming. In this one brief passage we hear the names *Messiah*, *Jesus* (who will save his people from their sins), and *Emmanuel* (God with us). These names make it clear that this adopted child will do what only God can do.

So what was the big deal with that whole line of Joseph’s ancestors connecting Joseph to Abraham and then to David? What difference did it make who Joseph’s family was if Jesus was not Joseph’s son, anyway? Matthew does not seem at all disturbed by the juxtaposition presented here. Maybe that is because there was another adoption story being told here as well. When the angel came to Joseph, perhaps God had two adoptions in mind. Perhaps the messenger from God was sent to bring about the adoption of Joseph so that Joseph and his whole family were made part of Jesus’ family. Perhaps the miracle Matthew recognized here was the adoption of Joseph, the inclusion of Joseph, son of David, into the story of Jesus, the one who came to save his people from their sins.

Joseph, son of David, was adopted into Jesus’ family. That whole family tree, the

good, the bad, and the ugly, were all adopted when Joseph named the child Jesus. God adopted Abraham, who turned to Hagar to bear the child God promised to him and to Sarah. God adopted Jacob, who stole the birthright from his brother by tricking his trustful old father Isaac. God adopted the twelve sons of Jacob, whose jealousy ran rampant. God adopted Judah, in spite of Judah's misdeeds with his daughter-in-law Tamar. God adopted the prostitute Rehab, who was a Canaanite. God adopted David, the golden boy who had no self-control, who had a man murdered in order to marry Bathsheba. God adopted Ruth the Moabite and others from outside the faithful community in order to carry out God's plan of salvation for the world. God adopted those who were so nondescript they are left off the family tree. God adopted a young teenage girl in order to bring peace on earth. All were adopted into God's family through Jesus "who came to save his people from their sins."

In the fullness of time God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children of God so that we are no longer slaves to the law but are heirs of the kingdom through our adoption in Jesus Christ.

We are adopted into God's family, redeemed from the law that demands punishment for our sin, and made heirs of God's Kingdom. Along with Joseph and his whole family, we are adopted into God's family. You and I and all kinds of folks involved in scandalous behavior—folks who are outsiders, do-nothings, and stepparents, folks we never imagined being part of our family line—are now adopted into the same family, God's family. Part of the miracle in the birth of Jesus is the adoption—Joseph's adoption of Jesus into his family and Jesus' adoption of Joseph and his whole family line. We are all adopted into God's family, no longer slaves under the law but heirs of God's Kingdom.

Therefore, how we treat one another matters very much. We must treat one another as family. We can fuss at each other when someone messes up, but because we are family, we must find ways, must work hard to find ways to be family for each other. For all of us have been adopted into Jesus' family. As we prepare to celebrate the miracle of our adoption this Christmas, let us make sure that this season of peace does not explode into a season of hate, for

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Thanks be to God.

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