

Advent 4

18 December 2022 –

BIBLE READINGS

[Isaiah 7:10-16](#)

Again the Lord spoke to King Ahaz, 'Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.'

But Ahaz said, 'I will not ask; I will not put the Lord to the test.'

Then Isaiah said, 'Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the young woman will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.'

[Matthew 1:18-25](#)

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: his mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

But after he had considered 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 home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' (which means 'God with us').

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

MESSAGE

Babies are usually a great gift and a source of much joy – even before they are born. They bring new life and hope to families and even to communities.

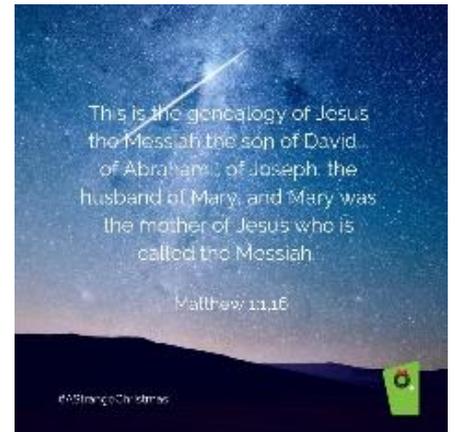


In our family, our daughter-in-law Helen is expecting her first baby in April next year. Her emotions range from joy and happiness, to fear and trepidation and everything in between. There are exciting times ahead for Helen and her husband Hugh as a longed for child is soon to be born into the world.

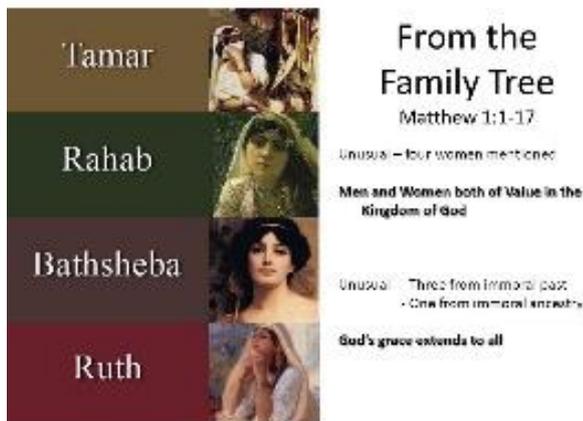


If we turn to the opening of Matthew's Gospel, the first book in our New Testament, there is also hope for a baby to be born to a woman named Mary. We're told from the opening verses that this child is the long anticipated Messiah, the new King David, and a descendant of the Father of the Jewish faith, Abraham.

This child is clearly destined to be a person of great note.



But before we get to the story of Mary and Joseph and their baby, there is a stylised genealogy that we didn't read, a long list of male names that follows the line of blessing through Abraham to David, and then the kingly line through David and ending up with Joseph who is engaged to be married to Mary.



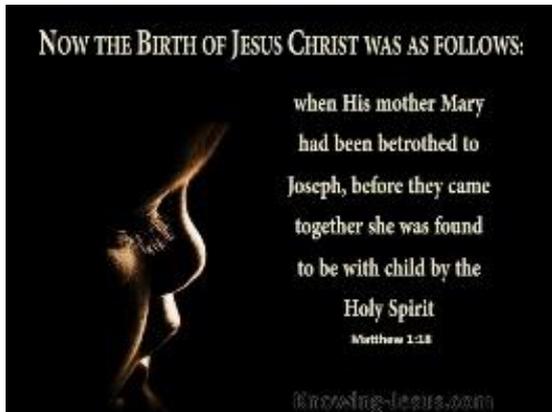
Among this list of 42 male names are a few **female** ring-ins ... with either foreign backgrounds and/or dubious sexual histories ... namely **Tamar, Rahab, Ruth** and **Bathsheba**.

You may have heard these names before. If not, you can find their stories in the books of Genesis, Ruth and 2 Samuel.

It isn't entirely clear why these particular women are included in the genealogy but it shows how the lineage of the Messiah to be born embraces both the **famous** and the **infamous**, both **men** and **women**, both **Jews** and **foreigners**. Behind some of these names lie stories of human craftiness, human compromise and human mess. So the Messiah is part of a long lineage that gives hope to everyone that they can be

included and that they belong.

It also suggests that when Mary is introduced to this list, a fifth female, there may also be skeletons hiding in her closet ... and so we come to the story of how Jesus was conceived and named and imagined.



As suggested by the genealogy, Jesus is not the offspring of a simple or standard marriage. While there are examples in the Scriptures of God helping barren women to conceive – think of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah and Elizabeth – here with Mary is something more mysterious ... **Mary conceives a child through the Holy Spirit!** Talk about messy and controversial!

This is not the gentle air-brushed Christmas story that we see depicted on Christmas cards. The clear inference is that Jesus is not just a human baby but in many ways also a divine baby.

Matthew's story quickly shifts the focus onto Joseph, the fiancé of Mary. How will he respond to this controversial and unexpected news from Mary?



We're told that Joseph is righteous, meaning that he wants to do the right thing. I suspect that he is probably inwardly **confused** if not downright **angry** with Mary ... I mean, pregnant through God's Spirit?!

What sort of **gullible fool** do you take me for? ...

Joseph is conscious of his own family's reputation as well as Mary's reputation once the story gets out. In Joseph's mind, the right thing to do is to divorce Mary and end the marriage contract. If he does it quietly, Mary may avoid being stoned to death, the punishment for sexual infidelity.

But then there is further mystery.

Joseph has a dream.

We might hear echoes of **another famous Joseph**, the son of Jacob, who also had odd dreams



that got him into trouble as we read in Genesis.

But God used Joseph and his dreams to bring blessing and to save not just the growing tribe of Israel from a widespread famine, but the whole nation of Egypt. With echoes of this ancient story reverberating in the background, the current Joseph and his dreams will once again bring **blessing** to Israel but also the wider world, through this son, who is to be named **Jesus, Yeshua** in Hebrew, meaning **God saves**.

But wait. There's more! Matthew adds as an aside that Mary's son who will save the nation has another precedent from Israel's past, from the time of Isaiah the prophet. ...

He will be **Immanuel**, meaning '**God with us**'.

The background to this name is a bit convoluted if you don't know the story of Israel's history fairly well ... so let's unpack this incident briefly ...

Matthew 1:23 (ESV)

"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

In the book of Isaiah, King Ahaz of Judah is being threatened by the king of Israel – who should be his friend – and by the king of Syria. Ahaz doesn't know what to do and so turns to the prophet Isaiah for advice. The prophet suggests that Ahaz ask God for a sign.

In mock humility, Ahaz refuses to ask God for a sign, but Isaiah supplies one anyway. A young woman will bear a son who will be called **Immanuel – God with us** – and before the child is two or three years old, the threat of these northern neighbours will have passed. The child Immanuel will be a sign that God will save Judah and her people. King Ahaz just needs to trust God.

The connection with Matthew's story is that the word for young woman can also be translated as **virgin** – and here is another virgin, Mary, whose son Jesus will also save the people and therefore act as Immanuel – God with us.

The upshot is that Joseph accepts the message in his dream, takes Mary as his wife, adopts her son as his own and gives him the name Jesus.



What might we take from Matthew's Advent story?

One challenge is our approach to **dreams**.

Would we ever be so bold as to make a major life decision based on a dream that we think is from God?

I wonder what dreams God has placed in our hearts to nurture and bring to life?

Might we be called – like Joseph – to set aside our ego and self-interest to honour what God's Spirit has shown us?

And how will we know that it's really a message from God? That's where we need the wisdom of each other.

Another take-away from this story are Joseph's **character** and **actions** that flow from it. He **trusts** God, accepts God's correction and also God's call to remain loyal to Mary. This took **faith** and **humility**. As we read on in Matthew's story after Christmas, Joseph also showed great **courage** to respond to another dream and flee to Egypt with Mary and Jesus to escape from Herod's rage.

During Advent we've been exploring various aspects of **hope**. One strong hope to emerge from Matthew's story is that God's plans can come to fruition through various means and through various people, some of whom may seem odd choices to us. The genealogy of Jesus shows that God accepts and uses **all sorts of people** – even some who we might find suspicious or compromised. But the good news is that we too are accepted into this story. We are blessed as we become part of this story.

Finally, we are meant to hear that Jesus is no ordinary baby. He is God's Messiah and God's Son in a way that no one would predict or expect.

He is Immanuel, God with us in a new and unexpected way.

And as the various Advent stories show, Jesus' birth will bring new hope, new justice and new love into the world – but in the fragile form of a baby.

This is what we remember and yearn for at Christmas as we look out on a world in desperate need of hope, justice and love.

SONG When Joseph was bridegroom (tune Columcille TiS 287)

When Joseph was bridegroom and Mary the bride,
the date of their wedding was his to decide,
for Mary was pregnant and Joseph beguiled
till Gabriel convinced him to parent God's child.

So Joseph consented to take second place
and save his beloved from certain disgrace;

informed by what Mary proclaimed in her song,
he kept faith though fearing that much might go wrong.

In touch with an angel, inspired by a dream,
aware that things sometimes are more than they seem,
confronted by God in sound, silence and sight,
all Joseph desired was to do what was right.

O God, who called Joseph to father your son,
and see, as a tradesman, your will being done,
teach us, when reluctant to stay on your side
like Joseph, though doubting, to dream then decide.

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