

# Matthew's Version

Hespeler, December 21, 2025 © Scott McAndless – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, Romans 1:1-7, [Matthew 1:18-25](#)

I love the Christmas story of the birth of Jesus, but there is one thing about it that I always want to keep in mind. There is not just one Christmas story. We have two stories of the nativity in the Bible. One is told in the Gospel of Matthew and the other in the Gospel of Luke.

Those are the only accounts we have. And both Gospels tell rich and deeply meaningful stories. But they are different stories concerned with very different details.

## Forcing Two Stories Together

Luke has angels, a manger, shepherds and a Roman census. Matthew has dreams, a star, magi and an angry Jewish king. Luke only focuses on Mary and her decisions, while Matthew focuses only on what Joseph does.

But every year, what do we do? We take those two different stories, and we smoosh them together. We somehow manage to get everyone in the same place at the same time. We get the angels, shepherds, the star and the magi all at the manger. We harmonize the two different stories.

And I get that we are sentimental about that harmonized tale. If you tell the story without any magi at the manger, people will go ballistic, even though Matthew insists that they were not there and that they visited the family in a house that they owned. If you set up a manger scene without a star shining down, you will get the same complaints even though Luke says nothing about any star.

## Respecting the Writers

My problem with this is not that the confusion gets in the way of figuring out what actually happened when Jesus was born. I am quite content to admit that we may never know exactly how that went down.

What bothers me is how little respect this shows to the original gospel writers. When we twist and distort Matthew's Nativity story to make sure that it doesn't contradict Luke's, we end up robbing Matthew's original tale of everything that made it so special. And when we twist Luke's story to make it fit with Matthew's, we end up robbing Luke's story.

When you reduce everything to the lowest common denominator, you end up with a story that is merely common. And Gospel stories are supposed to be anything but common.

## Joseph's Life in Bethlehem

For example, if you read Matthew's Nativity story closely, it becomes obvious that Joseph is living in Bethlehem at the beginning. He has a house there, a house where the Magi visit him, Mary and Jesus. According to Matthew, Jesus only ends up growing up in Nazareth because Joseph chooses to hide out there after King Herod attempts to kill the child and they return from Egypt.

That is central to the whole story in Matthew, and yet it contradicts what the Gospel of Luke says about the family being from Nazareth and how they were only passing through Bethlehem when the baby was born because of the census.

We have long tended to smooth out that contradiction. We do that by just ignoring the clear indications that Matthew gives of Joseph's deep roots in Bethlehem. We skip over Matthew's portrayal of Joseph as a leading citizen, descended directly from a line of kings, whose comfortable life is torn apart first by scandal and then by the persecution of a mad king.

But that is a great story. It deserves to be told all on its own. So, I'm going to tell it to you.

## The Engagement

Joseph remembered the day when his engagement was announced. Everywhere he walked throughout the town of Bethlehem, people would bow deeply and congratulate him.

Mary, the woman chosen for him by his parents, belonged to the other leading family in the district. The marriage would form an alliance that would guarantee the prominence and prosperity of the family for a long time to come. Their future was assured.

Some of his well-wishers even spoke of the exalted lineage of his family. They boldly spoke of how a favourable marriage like this could even lead to a restoration of the ancient privileges of the House of David – a revival of the glories of the old kingdom as an earthly power.

Joseph smiled and received their well-wishes with grace. He remembered wondering what this Mary was like. Was she pretty? Was she smart? His parents had assured him she was wealthy and chaste – that was what had mattered to them.

But Joseph found that many other things suddenly mattered a great deal because he felt as if his life was just beginning. He was excited and anxious about what might come next.

## Scandal

The day when the news about Mary's pregnancy spread throughout town was quite different. There was apparently no question whatsoever about her condition.

People had speculated wildly that something was wrong for a few weeks as she had remained hidden in her father's house. But she had apparently finally emerged, and speculation was replaced by certainty. She was going to have a child.

This day, as Joseph circulated the town, there were no smiles and certainly no congratulations. Instead, people looked away as he approached and pretended not to see him so that they didn't have to speak to him.

Joseph went through a full gamut of emotions that day. He had bursts of denial, anger, bargaining and depression.

## Joseph's Responsibilities

But the worst part of all of it was the knowledge that this was not just about how *he* felt. He had responsibilities. He knew that the reputation, standing and the very future of his ancient family were on the line. He had the obligation to preserve their name and to ensure that their lineage remained pure and undefiled.

So, it seemed clear what he had to do. For the sake of his family, he had to set aside this woman. And he really should do it publicly, too. He needed to denounce her in front of the whole community, which would lead to the elders condemning her to be stoned and her family compensating his family.

But something inside him wouldn't let him do that. He feared it was a weakness in him, that he could not lead his family into the next generation. But it was not weakness that was moving him; it was compassion.

He thought, perhaps, that he could set her aside quietly. That would be a kind of compromise that would save his family some shame and yet save her from public scorn. But even that option, he could not help but feel bad about.

And so it was a distraught young Joseph who fell into a restless sleep that night. Perhaps, in his

dreams, he would be able to find the direction he lacked in the waking world.

## Two Years Later

And then came the night, a couple of years later. Joseph, instructed by his dream, had gone through with the marriage. He and Mary became husband and wife. And a few short months later, her child was born.

He and Mary were happy together, and, perhaps in spite of himself, Joseph adored the little boy. But what he had gained in a new and happy home, Joseph had certainly lost in terms of social standing.

His family would barely speak to him, and not to Mary at all. People he had long considered friends would cross the street when they saw him approaching. All day long, as he carried out his business, he would see the people whispering to each other as they glanced his way.

His family was still prosperous and important, but now their standing seemed so fragile.

## Strange Visitors

But on this day, everything had come to a head in his mind. Strange visitors had come by the house. They had come from far away, from Persia. They had brought gifts for the child and declared that he was born to be a king. This was something that they had discovered by searching the stars using their arcane arts.

That had been gratifying in itself. Joseph had long felt that there was something truly extraordinary about the young boy, Jesus, and it was nice to have that confirmed.

But when the wise visitors mentioned having stopped off to seek directions from King Herod in Jerusalem, Joseph didn't necessarily know why, but he suddenly felt a deep dread within him. Something felt very wrong!

He went to bed that night full of worry and fear that he didn't understand. The dream that came to him made sense of what he was feeling and filled him with a firm conviction as to what he needed to do next.

## Alexandria

After that, Joseph had fled to Egypt with Mary and the boy. He had attempted to warn others, but his diminished standing in Bethlehem did not incline anyone, not even his family, to listen to his dream-fueled ravings.

So, they had gone alone to Egypt and waited there among the Jewish community. Joseph could no longer rely on his family property to sustain them, so he was forced to find work wherever he could.

Fortunately, Alexandria, the second largest city in the Empire, was growing in those days, and there was a lot of construction taking place. They were so desperate for labourers that, when a random Judean who could barely speak the local language showed up looking for work, nobody asked any questions.

Joseph learned a great deal about basic carpentry and stonework on the worksites of Egypt. But still he longed for Bethlehem and the life he had known there, even if it seemed as if Bethlehem had little use for him anymore.

## The Return

When the news spread through the diaspora community that Herod the Great had finally died, Joseph felt as if the time to return had come. Within a week, he had packed up his growing family, and they were on the highway back towards Judea.

When they were about halfway home, they heard the news that, apparently, Herod's kingdom had

been divided up among his sons. Archelaus had been given the territory of Judea, Herod Antipas had been given Galilee to the north, and others had been given more far-flung territories.

## Change of Plans

Joseph had a now-familiar sense of unease. How wise was it for him to return to Bethlehem, where his name was well known, when a son of Herod ruled over the territory? Surely Archelaus would discover him in no time at all; he only needed to ask the first passerby.

But what should he do? He didn't know. Throughout this seemingly endless ordeal, Joseph had despaired like this repeatedly. But each time, he had found wisdom to know what to do as he slept.

The wisdom that came to Joseph in his dreams this time allowed him to look at the problem from a whole different angle.

What if he didn't return to Bethlehem? What if, instead, he went to a place where nobody knew his family? He could still live among his own people and raise his children as Jews if he lived instead in the territory of another son of Herod.

They could live in Herod Antipas' territory of Galilee, where Jews also had large settlements. But no one there would know, nor would they reveal, the illustrious heritage of his family.

## Choosing Nazareth

This outside-the-box solution was only confirmed for him the next day when he spoke to fellow travelers – construction workers he had come to know in Alexandria – who were on their way to the area around Sepphoris in Galilee. There, Herod Antipas had established his new capital city. There would be plenty of work for carpenters and stone workers for some time to come.

And so, Mary and Joseph turned aside and travelled north. Eventually, they found a village only a day's journey from the capital to settle – a village called Nazareth.

## Joseph's Losses

Matthew tells a very different story of the nativity of Jesus than Luke does. One thing that really strikes me about his story, when I let it stand alone and stripped of all the elements that have become connected to it by osmosis from Luke's story, is the price that Joseph must pay.

When Mary and her unexpected child come into Joseph's life, he loses a great deal. He loses the status and honour that meant so much in that society, becoming a pariah in his own town.

Then he loses the very place that had given him his identity, fleeing his hometown in a desperate escape that no one else can understand or believe. He loses his ancestral land, which, in that agricultural society, was the only foundation of wealth and security.

## Joseph Didn't Regret

He finally must start all over again as a stranger and outsider in a new place where no one knows him. These are all huge losses that we can scarcely understand because we do not know how important such things were to people in that time and place.

But somehow, I suspect that Matthew wants us to understand that Joseph regretted none of it. He knew that he was being given the chance to finally be part of something that brought hope, life and new possibilities. He was given a new family and identity that meant the world to him. He did not mind the cost.

I only hope and pray that we could be as courageous as Joseph as we make our own choices to stand with those who are looked down upon by society. And at this Christmas time, let us count the blessings

that we have received from the choices that we have made, as I'm sure that Joseph counted his.