

**Sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas Day, December 31, 2017
Sung Mass**

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year B: Isaiah 61:10–62:3; Psalm 147:13–21; Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4–7; Matthew 1:18–25

In the Israel of Jesus’s birth, very young women, eleven- or twelve-years-old, were formally betrothed by contract to a man, who was often somewhat older. A young woman would continue to live with her parents for a year or a more. According to the commentaries I read, the timing of the move to her husband’s house, in Mary’s case at least, had to do with the ability of a husband to provide a home for a wife.¹

None of the authors of my three commentaries on Matthew—all men—suggested that the physical maturity of a very young woman was a consideration. So in the story of Jesus’ birth, Joseph is betrothed to Mary. She is not yet living with him; but she was discovered—to translate the Greek literally—“having

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, Updated ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 123–24; Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 36–37; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 93–94.

in the womb.”² In a dream Joseph is told, “Do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home, for the child begotten in her is through a holy spirit”³—not “the” holy spirit in the best manuscripts. The controversies about how to talk about “God with us” were still on the horizon when Matthew wrote in the last part of the first century.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew’s Jesus declared, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come . . . to fulfil them.”⁴ Yet as Dr. Mark Davis points out in his comments on Matthew’s story of Jesus’ birth, “[Joseph] is called to embrace [Mary’s] pregnancy as an act of the Holy Spirit—which means . . . to follow God by *not* following the law.”⁵

I remind you and myself that the Gospel According to Matthew begins with these words, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”⁶ The genealogy concludes, “and Jacob

² Brown, 124.

³ My translation following Brown, 124–25 and Davis.

⁴ Matthew 5:17.

⁵ <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/12/call-him-jesus-no-emmanuel-okay-jesus.html>, (accessed 11 December 2016).

⁶ Matthew 1:1.

[was] the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.”⁷ Then follows Matthew’s very short story of Jesus’ birth.

By beginning with this genealogy, Matthew begins to proclaim to his primarily Jewish Christian community that Jesus is the fulfilment of the law and the prophets. His name, Jesus, Joshua means, “The Lord Has Saved”—the English meaning of the name “Jesus.”⁸ Jesus is a descendant, as are all Jews, of Abraham, and he is also the true king of Israel.

Mary is not the only woman mentioned in this genealogy. The others are Tamar, a Canaanite, twice widowed daughter-in-law of Jacob’s son Judah, who then seduced Judah so she could have a child—recall the question Jesus would be asked about a woman widowed successively by seven brothers.⁹ “In the resurrection, whose wife will she be?”

Next is Rahab the harlot of Jericho who knows that God has given her Canaanite town to the Hebrews.

⁷ Matthew 1:16.

⁸ See note: *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1830, n. 1:31.

⁹ Mark 12:18–27; Matthew 22:23–33; Luke 20:27–40.

She saves the lives of their spies in exchange for her life and the lives of her household.¹⁰

Then Ruth, the Moabite woman, who remains loyal to Naomi after her husband dies. They return to Naomi's home, Bethlehem. After Boaz shows special kindness to Ruth, Naomi sends her to sleep one night at his feet. In the morning he has decided she will be his wife.

Then there is the wife of Uriah the Hittite, with whom David committed adultery and for whom he had her husband murdered.

I think there was some anxiety in Matthew's Jewish Christian community about who Jesus was known to have been, about Mary being with child before being taken to Joseph's home. It's worth noting that reading closely, Mary herself has no choice, no free will, about her role. God has acted—and was active through the conception and life of Jesus.

In his book, *Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams*, Matthew Walker, professor of

¹⁰ Joshua 2:1–24; 6:15–25.

neuroscience and psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and director of its Sleep and Neuroscience Lab, writes that our dreams have two primary functions: one is to “nurse our emotional and mental health”—which affects our whole bodies.¹¹ The second is to promote memory, problem solving and creativity.¹² They are more than Sigmund Freud’s theory of dreams being wish fulfillment.”¹³

Finally, the appellations—designations—son of Abraham, son of David, and Son of God all become new when Jesus rises from the dead. As Raymond Brown pointed wrote that the stories of Jesus conception and birth are good news, and that they belong in the gospels of Matthew and Luke because they are words that will bring to all who hear them a

¹¹ Matthew Walker, *Why We Sleep: Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams* (New York: Scribner, 2017), 207.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 194.

moment of decision about Jesus Christ: “Who is he?”
The birth stories are proclamations of Easter.¹⁴

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁴ Raymond E. Brown, *An Adult Christ at Christmas: Essays on the Three Biblical Christmas Stories* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1985), 8–9.