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Year A, Christmas Eve, Luke 2.1-20, 24 December 2016
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

This past Sunday, we approached Matthew’s version of the Christmas story through the lens of his often-ignored genealogy, and you were quite patient with my “experiment” as I ventured “into the weeds” and “down a few rabbit trails”—pick your metaphor. I promised you part two tonight: Luke’s version of Jesus’ birth and how he frames it with *his* version of the genealogy. Before I begin, however, I want to acknowledge what all of us already know: that, for many—and I’m one of them—Christmas is not the joyful holiday that we usually make it out to be. Indeed, as we’ll see in Luke’s story, in spite of the shining angels proclaiming “good news of great joy,” Mary herself seems to grasp that not all is as it seems. I’ll come back to this observation and to Mary, but for now let’s pick up the thread from Matthew.

Matthew began his genealogy of Jesus with Abraham and then moved forward in three historical periods, from Abraham through David and, then, surprisingly, not through another ancestor of Jesus but through the Babylonian exile. His point is usually not obvious to us, but it would have been like a flashing light to the Jewish Christians who were his first readers. In Jewish eyes at the time, the exile had not ended with their return from Babylon 500 years earlier and, thus, in their view they remained in their sins. Jesus, the Messiah, Matthew tells us, was born at the climax of this history and his birth signaled the end of their exile—a promise to free them from their sins and to lead them at last into the long-anticipated new age, the kingdom of God on earth. For Matthew, Jesus

was the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that, through him and his descendants, all the people of the earth would be blessed.

Luke, on the other hand, does not begin his story of Jesus with a genealogy—significantly, he places it immediately after Jesus' baptism—and, he does not focus as much on Joseph and his struggles. Instead, Luke focuses on the more intimate life of the families around Jesus. One commentator suggests that Luke is like Shakespeare in this regard, setting the stage early in his story by introducing his minor characters before bringing on the main players (NT Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, p. 378-9). And so, Luke begins with Zechariah and Elizabeth and the birth of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist.

John's mother, Elizabeth—like Sarah, the mother of Isaac, and Hannah, the mother of Samuel—was able to conceive only in her advanced aged and with the help of God. Thus, we learn that John's conception was miraculous but, as we'll see, not *quite* as miraculous as that of Jesus, since Mary conceived while she was still a virgin. Luke is suggesting here that, while John was undoubtedly a great prophet, Jesus is even greater. Meanwhile, he turns to Mary in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, when an angel of God was also sent to her. The angel announces that Mary too, is about to conceive, and that her conception would be "of the Holy Spirit," that is, without human agency. Further, Mary is told that she would bear a son; that she is to call his name Jesus, and that he will sit on the throne of his father, David, reigning over a kingdom that would last forever. The angel then continues: Jesus would also be considered "holy," but most significantly, he is the "Son of God."

Now, with the reference to Isaiah’s prophecy about the birth of a son who was to be named Emmanuel, Matthew was signaling that, in Jesus’ birth, “God is with us.” This claim is similar to, but perhaps not quite as direct as Luke’s claim that Jesus is, in fact, the Son of God. This is where Luke’s genealogy becomes relevant and important. As I mentioned, it occurs almost parenthetically after the story of Jesus’s baptism, and it affirms what we are told immediately after the baptism, where a voice comes from heaven, saying, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” Interestingly, Luke traces Jesus’ genealogy, not forward from Abraham, as Matthew did, but backward—backward from Jesus, though Joseph (“the supposed father of Jesus”), skipping Mary altogether, and on through 77 generations to the first human, Adam.

Writing largely to Gentile Christians, it may not be surprising to us that Luke tried to broaden Jesus’ appeal by tracing his lineage back behind Abraham to the father of the human race. However, what may come as surprise is that, in Luke’s genealogy, Adam is listed as “Adam, the son of God.” Actually, Luke’s language may also be confusing. Don’t we as Christians affirm every Sunday in the Nicene Creed that Jesus is “the *only* Son of God?” In trying to address this question, we’re pointing ahead to the end of the story in the Gospels and even beyond, but this is exactly what Luke himself is doing here. He’s giving us more than a strong hint about how he understands the birth of Jesus because he also knows the end of the story.

Designating Adam as “the son of God” recalls that God created Adam directly, in the image and likeness of God, and that Adam was given life by God’s breath or spirit. All humans descended from Adam were originally intended to be

understood as sons or, we would say today, children of God. But after Adam sinned, God entered into a covenant with Abraham and *his* descendants to work with and through them to restore humans to their original status. This is not the place to rehearse the history of this phrase, “son of God.” Let me just say it was sometimes applied to the nation of Israel collectively, to David and some of his descendants as kings, and finally to the Messiah, usually envisioned as a king himself.

What we as Christians need to understand, looking at this long history through the lens of the Nicene Creed, is that while the phrase, son of God, suggested a high and noble status, in *none* of these earlier cases was it intended to suggest divinity. Even the Messiah was not originally understood to be divine. However, reflecting back on Jesus’ birth from the perspective of his death and resurrection, early Christians began to diverge from Judaism in their understanding of the Messiah. There is ample evidence in early Christian writings that when Christians applied the Messianic title to Jesus, they understood Jesus to have divine qualities—perhaps not as fully developed they would be in the Nicene Creed but, significantly, more exalted than the divine qualities claimed for Rome’s Caesars.

So, by tracing his lineage back to Adam, the son of God, Luke is claiming at least two things. First, he views Jesus as the *new* or, as St. Paul would argue, the *final* Adam. As such, Jesus is also the *true* human in whom the original image and likeness of God remains intact and through whom God would restore the original glory and purpose to the human race as a whole—this is what it means, from a Christian perspective, to claim that all the world would be blessed through

Abraham. Second, as the final Adam, Jesus, the Messiah is the Son of God in a way that is greater even than King David, but also and especially in way that is greater than Caesar—Caesar would be *declared* divine, usually after his death, whereas Jesus was actually *born* divine. It is little wonder that Rome saw early Christians as subversive.

To conclude, let me return to Luke’s more familiar Christmas story. We know it well: after the long trip to Bethlehem with a pregnant wife, after having to seek shelter in a stable since there was no room in the inn, after the birth of Jesus in the stable, and after the shepherds see a glorious multitude of angels’ announcing Jesus’ birth, Luke brings us back to Mary. He tells us that “...Mary treasured all these words [the words that the shepherds had told her] and pondered them in her heart.”

Year after year, at Christmas, it is this statement that I find most intriguing, that I find myself pondering. Mary, like Luke himself, is looking ahead. Jesus’ conception may be miraculous and his genealogy may mark him as the divine son of God, but in first-century Palestine theology was also politics. On some level, Mary understands that these very claims point toward a confrontation Jesus will not be able to avoid, a confrontation that would lead almost inevitably to some awful destiny that she can glimpse but not yet fully grasp. So, she ponders this destiny, for, as Simeon predicts when Jesus is circumcised eight days later, her heart will be pierced because of her son’s destiny; it will be pierced through to her very soul.

All of this, and much more we don’t have time to elaborate (see MJ Borg and JD Crossan, *The First Christmas*), is present in the beginning. Yes, Jesus is the

Messiah, but not as the Jewish people have come to expect, and not as Rome and the forces of darkness can tolerate. Yes, Jesus is the Lord, but as he matures he interprets this to mean that he must be a servant of all. And yes, Jesus is the Son of God, but even in this he gives something up to become human—the one true human perhaps, but human nonetheless. For, in becoming human, in becoming like one of us, he will suffer and he will die. And yet, even as Mary ponders these things in her heart, she realizes that joy and sorrow are not necessarily opposites. They can arise together when she gives herself to God and joins her destiny to that of her son's, when she gives herself to God's ultimate purposes for the restoration of humankind in and through Jesus. She was his first disciple, and she remains our primary role model of what following Jesus should look like. "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Amen.