

Sunday 5 January 2020, Cashmere Presbyterian Church
Sermon: The Nations will be drawn to your light
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Welcome to 2020, a new year, and a new Gospel in our Lectionary cycle. This year the Common Lectionary follows gospel readings from Matthew. So it is appropriate that we begin the year with Matthew, specifically his fascinating story about wise men, scholars of the stars, magi from the east, coming to visit the young Jesus in Bethlehem.

You'll be hearing more from Matthew this year, and as part of your holiday reading this week I would suggest that you read all the way through Matthew's gospel, to get a sense of it. It's the longest of the gospels at 28 chapters, and we don't often read it all the way through, but it's helpful I think. Let's help you out by starting at the beginning.

Unlike the other 3 gospels Matthew decided to start with a genealogy of Jesus. You might remember that Luke also includes a genealogy of Jesus, and if you ever put the two genealogies side by side you will notice that the 2 genealogies are quite different from each other. Both name King David as Jesus' ancestor, but one genealogy is through David's son Solomon and the other genealogy is through David's son Nathan. Presumably one of the genealogies is Joseph's ancestry and the other is Mary's ancestry. But what is interesting as we start on Matthew is the bits in brackets in the list of names. Can anyone read for us to verse 6?

This is the list of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, a descendant of David, who was a descendant of Abraham.

2-6 From Abraham to King David, the following ancestors are listed: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah and his brothers; then Perez and Zerah (their mother was Tamar), Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon, Salmon, Boaz (his mother was Rahab), Obed (his mother was Ruth), Jesse, and King David.

The important thing about the woman in brackets, other than the obvious fact that women's names were not normally listed in a genealogy at all, is that the women named in brackets were not respectable Jewish women. Rahab was the Jericho woman who helped the Israelite spies, and Ruth was a Moabite.

Matthew was interested, then, in the non-Jewish aspects in Jesus' blood line. I wonder why.

It sets the scene for Matthew's gospel of Jesus, a gospel which often shows Jesus at odds with his own people, at odds with the religious leadership of the Jewish people. For example, Matthew adds to Jesus' parable of the vineyard tenants killing the land owner's messengers and finally his son. Matthew adds Jesus saying:
"Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruit of the kingdom" (Matthew 21:43)

And then at the end of the gospel, you may remember the famous words of the Great Commission, Matthew 28:18 to 20

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you

So right at the beginning of Matthew's gospel he includes women of other nationalities in Jesus' ancestry. And right at the end of his gospel he finishes with the great commission, to go into all the nations, to make disciples. And in the middle he has Jesus promising that the kingdom of God would be given to the nations.

As a sign of God's call to all the nations, Matthew tells us about some scholars from the east, wise men of the stars, who come to Bethlehem bearing gifts. And as he tells this story it is very much written as a fulfillment of another prophecy, that of Isaiah in chapter 60, that we heard today.

*³ Nations will be drawn to your light,
And kings to the dawning of your new day.*

*The wealth of the nations will be brought to you;
From across the sea their riches will come.*

*⁶ Great caravans of camels will come, from Midian and Ephah.
They will come from Sheba, bringing gold and incense.
People will tell the good news of what the LORD has done!*

They will come to you, declares Isaiah, the peoples of the world will bring gifts to you, treasures of gold and incense. Your home-coming after exile, your new day, your greatness, wrote Isaiah.

The story in Matthew's gospel of the magi expresses this beautifully, and we picture in our nativity the Three Kings, stately and magnificent, symbolizing all that is great in the world, riches and learning, in star, contrast to the rough earthy humility of shepherds and manger, come to the very heart of the Jewish faith, the home town of their greatest hero, King David.

And yet even here Matthew pre-figures the trouble and horror in the gospel story, for the King of the Jews, Herod, reacts not with adoration but with attack, killing the boys of Bethlehem in a brutal attempt at self-preservation.

So Matthew sets the scene for his gospel of Jesus Christ. Right here in the story of the Magi Matthew tells us at once that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy, of the messianic hopes of his people, and that Jesus will be rejected by his own people. Matthew tells us that Jesus is the hope not just of his own people but of the whole world, and is Good News not just for his own people but for all the peoples, all the nations.

Matthew begins by the nations, represented by the magi, coming with gifts to the heart of the Judaism. And Matthew ends with the disciples of Jesus being sent out with the gift of the Good News, out from the heart of the Judaism out into the nations, for all the world. This is indeed Good News for us, for we are people of the nations. The magi represent us in the nativity story. We are included in the redemption story of Jesus Christ. Matthew has written us in. Matthew's gospel is written for us, for you and I and here in Cashmere, we who are literally at the ends of the earth, impossibly far away in space and time from that strange day when magi turned up in a family home with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. This baby king they honoured is our king also, and his kingdom has no nationhood but is for all. For this we honour the Magi, and Matthew who recorded it for us.