

Sunday, December 19, 2010: Matthew 1:18-25

by [Fred Craddock](#) in the [December 14, 2010](#) issue

When the lectionary tells me I can skip a few verses, I am not suspicious. I don't ask what secret is being kept from me or what doctrine is being protected. Very likely the omitted material is totally boring, or too bloody, or repeated elsewhere, or judged to offer no nourishment to faith hungering for bread. Most likely the decision to omit was a practical one: in a three-year cycle there is not enough time to ponder every verse in the Bible. It's only this and nothing more. I am not suspicious.

But I am curious. Is someone protecting me from my Bible? Not a welcome thought. Is something being forbidden, like the one tree in the Garden of Eden? I am in no condition to proceed to 1:18 until I take a peek at 1:1-17. I know it's the fourth Sunday of Advent and Bethlehem is only a short walk away, but this is important. What's in Matthew 1:1-17?

A genealogy! I should have known. President Eisenhower once said that as a boy in a religious home, he was instructed to read the entire Bible, but, he said, "I was permitted to skip the begets." Good enough for me.

I did, however, notice something unusual about verse one. It is an introduction not to the genealogy but to the whole of the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew 1:1 could be translated: "A Book of Genesis of Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of Abraham." It is the writer's title for the book the church calls the Gospel of Matthew. The writer almost repeats the title at verse 18: "And the genesis of Jesus Christ took place in this way." In other words, the story we are about to read joins creation (genesis) and history (genealogy) to the person Jesus Christ. The story we are about to read is huge! And when we read, we are pondering the activity of God, which is to say we are in Advent.

Since Matthew could assume a reader with little need for explanations, we may want to remind ourselves of a few details about the story. First of all, this Joseph recalls another Joseph, also a dreamer and an interpreter of dreams (Gen. 37:40-41). Second, the name Jesus is a variation of Joshua, the successor to Moses, as Jesus will be in Matthew's portrayal of him.

Finally, it's helpful to note that the reader of Matthew 1:18–25 has valuable information before the characters in the story do. For example, the reader knows that Mary is with child in verse 18; Joseph does not know until verse 20. This difference makes his behavior all the more remarkable. When he decides to protect Mary from humiliation and punishment (Deut. 22:23–27), he does so contrary to the law, and he does so because he is just (righteous). Matthew's Jesus will give repeated instruction in this justice that exceeds justice.

Yet these insights do not alter the announcement as announcement: "The genesis of Jesus Christ took place in this way." Suddenly we are launched into the season of Advent, which puts before us the twin mysteries of our faith: the mystery of the God who comes to us and the mystery of our longing for God to come. If there is a third mystery, it is the tenacity of our faith which refuses to give up hope. Some do give up hope and demand that faith become sight. They stand on street corners shouting "Lo, here" and "Lo, there." But we do not follow. Why not? Is it because it is easier to believe that a messiah will come than to believe that a messiah has come? Is it because the overwhelming powers of greed and injustice argue persuasively that God has not and will not come? I do not know.

What I do know is that every year for four weeks we wait. Ours is not a passive waiting; we wonder as we wait. We wait in the heavy joy of repentance, which cleanses us to be ready to receive the One Who Comes. We renew baptismal vows. We encourage one another in order to be a community of fresh expectancy. And we pray, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and "Come, O Long Expected Jesus." At times we fuss at God: "How long, O Lord? How long will you tarry?" Our generation is impatient. Advent lasts too long. Nasty notes are passed to the choirmaster: "We don't know these Advent songs. Why don't we sing some carols? Everybody is already having Christmas except the church." The preacher is urged to dip into Luke at least one Sunday early; a few angels and a shepherd or two would surely get us out of this dark waiting room.

We are like the student who responded to Robert Frost at a poetry reading. Frost sometimes read his poetry to university audiences. On one such occasion he closed his reading with the familiar line "promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep." A hand shot up.

"You spoke of promises to keep. What promises?"

Frost replied, "If I had wanted you to know, I would have told you."

When we're tired of waiting for the promise to be revealed, Matthew is good for us. He chides us. "If you think four weeks is a long wait, join me on page one of the Book of Genesis of Jesus Christ and we will journey through 42 generations, at the end of which we will meet 'Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.'" Think of Matthew 1:18-25 as a birth announcement; it is brief—and all the words are the author's, with neither Joseph nor Mary having speaking parts.