



We have been following *EPIC, The Astonishing Story of God and the World*, and now have come to the birth of the Messiah. God's promises to Abraham began a 2000 year period of waiting for a son of Abraham who would save a broken and lost human race. Jesus was born "in the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4)—as God determined to intervene in the repeating cycles of human failure in a unique way. Given the long period of anticipation, Jesus is introduced with a striking absence of fanfare. But he is a different sort of savior.

There are four biographies of Jesus that begin the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each of them tells the story of Jesus' life: his teaching, his miracles, his relationships, and finally his death and his resurrection. For six weeks we're going to find ourselves in these texts, starting with consideration of his nativity in this message. Three of the four Gospels have some reference to the birth of Jesus. The gospel of Mark does not.

Lets consider the first sentences in Matthew, Luke, and John.

Matthew 1:1:

**<sup>1</sup>A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.**

A less dramatic beginning to 'the greatest story ever told' is hard to imagine.

Luke also begins without drama, as the author describes his credentials as an historian.

Luke 1:3, 4:

**<sup>3</sup>[I determined] to write an orderly account . . . <sup>4</sup>so that you may know with certainty the things that have taken place.**

John transcends history in beginning his account.

John 1:1, 14:

**<sup>1</sup>The Word was God. . . . <sup>14</sup>The Word became**

**flesh and dwelt among us.**

Absent bright lights and loud music, we must attend carefully to what we are told as we are introduced to Jesus. We'll take Matthew first. The genealogy with which he begins is organized with a purpose. We note that the record is incomplete (some generations are missing) and what we have is arranged in a pattern (3 groups of fourteen generations according to Matthew). These groupings serve to call attention to Abraham and David as Jesus' forebears. Why them in particular?

First, the Savior must be a descendent of Abraham so that he is seen to be part of the long story. God promised the ancient patriarch that his offspring would bring salvation to the world and God keeps his promises. However disappointing the covenant people proved to be, God remains faithful. Jesus is the 'seed of Abraham' (Galatians 3:16) who fulfills the long-standing promise. In addition, references to Abraham point to family. Faith in Christ makes every kind of person a child of Abraham and therefore brother and sister to one another.

Second, Jesus' descent from David identifies him as king. But he is a king unlike the failed kings before him—a monarch who will establish justice and honor the righteous. And his ascent to the throne of David is only the beginning. Israel's king becomes King of kings, nor is that enough—"Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11).

Matthew's genealogy, highlighting Abraham and David, gives us reason to hope for great and surprising things to follow. But we can also observe a lack of interest in secular history. Matthew carefully notes the names of otherwise obscure men and women, but he is unconcerned about the rise and fall of empires. There is no reference to the great pyramids, to Hammurabi's laws, to the naval power of Phoenicia, to the dazzling majesty of Babylon, not to mention the far away cities of the Indus Valley or the dynasties of China. In the fullness of time, God sent his son—a moment in history measured by the condition of

God's people, not the status of worldly powers.

Matthew 1:4b-6a:

**<sup>4</sup>Nahshon the father of Salmon, <sup>5</sup>Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup>and Jesse the father of King David.**

So who is Obed? He was a farmer who lived in an insignificant town, as his father had done. His mother and grandmother were both foreigners. Yet his life, recorded in Scripture will be remembered and appreciated for eternity. Ramses II, the great pharaoh of Egypt, with his golden palace and his mighty armies who is, roughly, the contemporary of Obed will not be remembered at all.

Which garage start up will be noticed in six months or 2 years from now? Which political positioning breathlessly reported today will anybody care about a year from now or ten years from now? By contrast, we can be sure that what God is accomplishing in communities of faith is eternally significant, however humble it seems in the moment. Jesus said that a poor widow who placed two coins in the treasury offered more than the large amounts given offhandedly by rich people. Jesus said that an unnoticed visit to a lonely prisoner is received as if it were a visit to him.

I was taught a perspective on life when I was first a Christian—"Only one life twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last." Matthew's genealogy underscores this truth.

Luke also writes of Jesus' birth and childhood. If Matthew begins with a genealogy, Luke gives us an historian's statement of purpose.

Luke 1:1-4

**<sup>1</sup>Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup>just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. <sup>3</sup>With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup>so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.**

This opening paragraph fails the fanfare test as surely as Matthew's listing of 'begats.' But importantly, it argues for

reliability. From the first days of the church to the present there have been false accounts of Jesus' life and purpose. Jesus will sometimes be described as an ethereal figure beckoning those who are 'spiritual but not religious.' He might be enlisted as a Marxist revolutionary, a Tea Party activist, a therapist, a simple peasant story-teller, or a superhero.

Luke's opening paragraph points us away from speculation about Jesus toward reliable and careful history written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. With confidence, therefore, we ought to be eager students who expect to encounter the truth about Jesus in Scripture. Matthew's opening sentences remind us of Jesus' place in Israel's story. Luke's opening sentences give us reasons to be confident in the biblical record of the Savior's story.

Moving beyond the introduction, Luke 1-3 records the longest account of Jesus' birth. And those whose voices are heard in this text are either majestic angels or (again) insignificant men and women. Zechariah, Mary, Elizabeth, shepherds, and Simeon—nobodies all—have shaped our understanding of the incarnation and our experience as worshippers.

Perhaps there is a lesson here. If Jesus' story gave ordinary people a chance to speak the greatness of God at its beginning, we should expect it does so still. I think Luke's account suggests that there are ordinary disciples in our day and age who should speak joyfully of their encounters with the Lord.

Finally, the gospel of John also makes reference to Jesus' human beginning. John's burden is different from Matthew's concern for history or Luke's for reliability. He writes of the self-limiting love of God who stepped from eternity into time and gave up divine privilege to become human.

John 1:1-14:

**<sup>1</sup>In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was with God in the beginning. . . . <sup>14</sup>The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.**

In Philippians Paul writes, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:6-7). He gave up

everything to be human: to become a servant, a criminal, and a sacrifice.

Ecclesiastes despairingly remarks that there is nothing new under the sun. Life always ends in death. Hope always descends to sorrow. God's prophets are no match for his people's enduring stubbornness. And so God acted decisively by himself, becoming human. The birth of Jesus is unique, something new under the sun, something unimaginably beautiful—We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Let me make one more observation. The book of Hebrews points to the incarnate Christ as a high priest and describes profound help for sinners. "By virtue of his own suffering under temptation he is able to help those who are exposed to temptation" (Hebrews 2:18 JBP).

We need help when we face powerful longings or fears. It is crucial to know that Jesus understands the persuasive power of temptation and that he is not disgusted when we speak to him of repeated failure. His human journey gives him inside understanding of our need for help. "For we have no superhuman High Priest to whom our weaknesses are unintelligible—he himself has shared fully in all our experience of temptation, except that he never sinned. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with fullest confidence, that we may receive mercy for our failures and grace to help in the hour of need" (Hebrews 4:15-16 JBP).

I want to conclude this consideration of Jesus' birth (Emanuel, God with us) by reading the account of Anna's experience in Luke.

Luke 2:36-38:

**<sup>36</sup>There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup>and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. <sup>38</sup>Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.**

Like others in Luke's telling, Anna was a nobody who

was given a voice. She is described mostly in terms of what is missing—her husband is dead, her youth long past. She is alone and there is no variety in her daily experience.

Yet one day she was permitted to encounter the answer to her prayers, an encounter that has three stages. First, she came toward Jesus. Second, she gave God thanks and finally she spoke about him to others. Anna's choices here can be seen as a helpful pattern.

May she serve as an inspiration for us to worship Jesus, draw near, give thanks, and make his truth known.