

## MOTHERS OF GOD

Texts on the Second Sunday in Advent

December 7, 2008

*Isaiah 7: 1-4, 10-16 and Matthew 1: 1-25*

“A gentle woman housed God in her womb and asked as its price peace for the world, salvation for those who are lost, and life for the dead.”

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

**T**his Advent, we are paying close attention to the very opening of each gospel. Today, we will hear from *Matthew*. Recall that this evangelist wrote for a Jewish community—people thoroughly shaped by the books Christians call the Old Testament. In order to be heard by people so deep in their traditions, Matthew’s gospel had to embrace all their hopes. From the first verse, this had to be a page-turner. Listen. [Read Matt 1: 1-17]

Thrilling page-turner? A long list of the father of the father of who? Who really cares? But Matthew has put something in this list so unusual that you may never forget what you hear now. In among these perfectly arranged sets of generations, 14 and 14 and 14 more—the forty-one fathers of Jesus—Matthew brings out on stage five mothers; five out of forty-one. Now, the Bible offers names for many of the other mothers in the family tree, but Matthew selects five: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, Uriah’s wife, and Mary. If you were a Jew 1900 years ago hearing this story for the first time, your ears would be burning now, for these five women share something strange, and Matthew is waving it like a flag at the opening of his gospel.

**Tamar** was the young widow who so wanted a child to keep the family line alive, but her father-in-law Judah wouldn’t help her get a new husband. So she dressed as a prostitute and lured her father-in-law into a tent and got herself pregnant by him. That child is one of the forty-one grandfathers. **Rahab** was a prostitute—Joshua 6:17. The Bible only names the father of the boy Boaz; it doesn’t say that Rahab was his mother. But Matthew fits Rahab into the family tree, because the flag he wants to wave mere facts can’t fly high enough. **Ruth** was another young widow, a foreigner coming into Israel with no prospects. Her mother-in-law plotted to get her a man. “Dear Ruth, late on the night of the harvest festival, go up to the loft in my cousin Boaz’s barn and see where he lies down; then, go and uncover his feet and you lie down too and he will tell you what to do.” Who doubts that the rest of this scene is best told in your imagination? The next day, Boaz arranges to marry Ruth, the story goes, and she too becomes one of the forty-one mothers of God. Last in the quartet of Matthew’s mothers is **Bathsheba**, whom David saw bathing as he went for a walk up on the palace wall. David inquired about her. “She is the wife of Uriah, your captain, sir.” David sent for her. She came to him, and he lay with her. Soon, she sent a message, ‘I am with child.’ (2 Sam 11.3ff) Although that child died, Bathsheba would give birth to Solomon, the first king of David’s long dynasty, whose names are all remembered by Matthew. But no other mothers until Mary; only these five.

What can Matthew mean by this? Listen, as he continues his story where we left off. [Read Matthew 1: 18-25] Mary joins her four sisters now, doesn’t she? Joseph is certainly troubled by his fiancée’s big belly, and Matthew doesn’t say Mary was a virgin—it is Luke who adds that idea. So Mary too is one of the mothers who did not follow the rules with their men in their beds. Why tell the story like this?

Because desire in the body can so truly tell us what God's love and freedom is like. And because throughout the last few centuries before Jesus' time and for centuries thereafter, Jewish rabbis taught the Bible with a wonderful, strange mixture of precision and creativity. Treating every verse like a seed of divine truth, they watered them with elaborate story-telling so that the goodness of God might burst forth in radiant flower. This kind of interpretation was called *midrash*. An ancient midrash on the Exodus story of the baby Moses' being found among bulrushes solves a problem. *How can Pharaoh's daughter get the basket, for rushes grow thick far from shore, and no princess would wade out in wet robes?* The midrash answer? God stretched her arm like dough, twenty feet, so she could take the precious vessel. You can feel how midrash works. Hear the joy and the laughter in it, the song of praise. It shouts: *What a God!* "Many Jewish authors stress that [*midrashim*] are not intended to be taken literally."<sup>1</sup> Why write them? Because the things of God and love for God cannot be found in the hunt for facts, which ends in a wasteland of sullen proof-texting and arrogant egos. Telling God's story as mere facts destroys faith. Midrash opens a door into passionate loving God beyond the edge.

When Matthew wrote, *midrash* was how they brought their Bible readings to life. Matthew probably wrote this story so it could be used along with the lectionary for the day, Isaiah 7: "Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and call his name Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'" Knowing that nobody knew for certain who Jesus' natural father was, Matthew fetched up from the Bible a whole net full of fishy fathering and mothering, every one of which begat another father to the kings of Judah who was mothered by one of these memorable, assertive, hopeful women who chose what they chose in spite of reproach, blaming no one, yet whose choices and children were chosen by God for God's play. So they say. Can we say that all five of these mothers conceived their children "from the Holy Spirit"? So Matthew dreamed up Joseph—yes, I think he midrashed Mary's man from a memory of that Joseph who was sold into Egypt, the dreamer whose dreams saved the nation. Matthew made his Joseph wake up from sleep—and maybe you too—with the word 'God is with us' sounding in his heart. "And he took Mary as his wife, as the angel had commanded, but knew her not until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus."

These things were not written to read like newspaper stuff. Why say them? Partly, as we've said, because the things of God cannot fit into a suit of mere words; sometimes only songs will do. And partly because the way Mark opened his story at the river Jordan just wasn't wet enough; it was missing the motherhood of God. And partly, to pull you out of the audience and up on the stage of God's play, where facts fade in the face of your desire to take God's part—the part God gives you in that play where God sees kings in the hearts and bellies of unwed mothers. *What a God!* If you will stop taking yourself so literally, and play . . . see what can happen.

In your Christmas giving, you are the magi, and the Christ child looks up from every gift you give. That last awful argument that you won . . . you were Peter by the fire, denying, and when you were done, did you see Christ looking up? The bread we break and the cup we pass today . . . will you see not so much the old story as one to come, where all God's people are seated in peace with drink and food enough, and from that table, Christ the host looks up. For visions

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<sup>1</sup> Article on "Midrash" at [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

like these, God is sending stories down the years, asking you to see God's mothers, and then to be God's mothers. Yes, you. Who could ask for anything more?

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

*delivered at First United Presbyterian Church, Silver Creek, N.Y.*