



Finding God

Our Response to God's Gifts

The Story Behind the Story

Advent is a time for sharing stories of our faith. Explore anew with us the rich history and tradition behind some of these well-known tales. It might feel as if you're reading them for the first time. †

A Family Tree

I love hearing stories of distant relatives. I wonder what secrets to my future might be locked in memories from my family's past. Now imagine digging into the history of your faith family. Believe it or not, clues to unlocking such stories appear in a Bible passage often seen as boring! Where is this passage? Firmly rooted in the opening lines of Matthew's Gospel—the genealogy of Jesus. Curious?

It's important to note that this genealogy is not like most found in ancient times. Typically, such family records highlighted important men; women were rarely included. Neither were scandalous ones. Interestingly enough, Matthew includes both.

The intrigue begins with the very first entry.

Abraham became the father of Isaac. But Isaac is the second-born son. No mention of Ishmael, the firstborn banished to the desert with his mother. Next comes Isaac, father of Jacob. You might remember Jacob; he tricked his twin, Esau, out of his birthright. Other men listed are Judah, who sold his brother Joseph into slavery, and David, who made some questionable choices with women and rivals. Then there are the women. No queens or patriarchal wives



here. Instead we find a Gentile proud of herself, a prostitute, a seductress, and a teen mother. Those are the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba, and Mary.

Not so boring, right? But why include these stories? In truth, this list is the perfect foreshadowing for the unexpected message Jesus shared in his ministry.

These are stories of people who struggle, sometimes fail, but keep trying. Stories of men and women who persevere and do God's work in the midst of messy circumstances and real-life turmoil. These are our stories. We, like them, are flawed and sometimes weak. Yet through our Baptism, we are called to join Christ's family tree and invite others to do the same. Imagine the family tree continuing with "Today [your name] is called; live the faith and by your example call someone else." ■

Matthew vs. Luke

Two genealogies of Jesus appear in the Gospels, one in Matthew and one in Luke. Scholars have long debated and questioned their differences. While we'll never know for sure, it's interesting to explore the commentaries, or explanations, of these scholars. One possible understanding for the differing genealogies looks at two ways of relating Jesus' relationship to people. In Matthew, the genealogy begins with Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. Through this connection, Jesus is related to all Jews, showing that he is their Messiah. This fits with the purpose of the Gospel of Matthew, which is to prove that Jesus is the Messiah. The purpose of the Gospel of Luke is to show that Jesus is the Savior of the whole world. For this reason, the genealogy presented in Luke traces Jesus' ancestry all the way back to Adam, relating him to all mankind. ■

→ GO BEYOND

Explore stories of your faith family by researching names mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus. Check the Internet or trace the history of people like Jesse, David, Ruth, and Tamar in their Old Testament accounts. What gifts do these people possess that you see in yourself? How can you grow and learn from their examples? ■

The Story of Herod

Some stories we wish could be avoided, like the one near the end of Matthew's Infancy Narrative. It tells of a king ordering the death of innocent children. What could possibly motivate such an act, and why would Matthew choose to include it?

To better understand, we need first to meet Herod, king of Judea. When Jesus was born, Herod was already an old man. He had spent his entire adult life in power, which says volumes about his cunning and strength. You see, Herod lived in complicated times. Power changed hands unexpectedly, and a coup was always being plotted. Herod had a gift for finding favor with the winning side.



Herod, King of Judea.

He often fought against the Jewish people over whom he ruled. While religiously Jewish, Herod held little regard for the Sanhedrin and fully supported Rome. He was called the king of the Jews but had to fight hard and depend on Rome to maintain control.

While on the surface, Herod was wealthy and powerful, he became increasingly insecure in the years leading up to Christ's birth. He suffered many physical ailments, but his mental state was of bigger concern. Herod lived in constant fear of plots, real and imagined, to overthrow him. In his paranoia, he ordered the execution of many, including his two favorite sons and most beloved wife. His own family became expendable. Should we be surprised that an infant stranger rumored to be the king of the Jews could spark his wrath?

Clearly Herod had lost his grip on reality, but why would Matthew choose to tell the story? Perhaps it was to show us that Jesus was born into a violent world. Not unlike today, the desire for power, money, and fame led people to act in brutal ways. Families were ripped apart. Into this harsh landscape, God became incarnate. Matthew's account is a reminder that through love, Jesus came to minister within and to a violent world. The Gospel thrived there, and with this passage we are heartened that it can and will flourish anywhere. Through his Incarnation, Jesus ushered in a kingdom of hope and redemption even amid tragedy. ■

Herod was a long-time friend and supporter of Mark Antony. However, Mark Antony's love affair with Cleopatra posed a problem for Herod. Cleopatra tried many times to use her influence to take lands back from Herod that she believed rightly belonged to Egypt. ■



Marble bust of Cleopatra VII of Egypt from 30–40 BC.

→ GO BEYOND

As you watch or read the news, what stories strike you about politics and leadership in today's world? Where do you see a need for peace and justice? Consider sharing your thoughts around the dinner table or in a discussion with family as you travel in the car. These talks about current events will help your children see how they are connected to the plight of their brothers and sisters around the world. ■

Herod the Builder



Model of Herod's Temple, photo by Berthold Werner.

Herod enjoyed wealth and loved displaying it. During his reign, he ordered almost constant construction projects in Jerusalem and other cities. Among these he is probably most known for rebuilding the Jerusalem temple. Herod also sought to make a name for himself by giving lavish gifts to cities across the empire. He provided both materials and money for countless building projects. In one Greek city, he made possible the constructions of a colonnaded street, fountains, and public baths. In yet another example of his extreme tastes, Herod chose to pave the main street in Antioch with marble and line it with colonnades. While Herod was an oppressive leader, his buildings and fortresses remain amazing architectural achievements. ■



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Divine Messenger

We know well the New Testament stories of the angel Gabriel's visits to Zechariah and Mary. But did you know that this was not Gabriel's first appearance in Biblical writing? This same angel identifies himself in the Book of Daniel. Gabriel is sent by God to explain to a young Jew named Daniel promises of deliverance and glory to the Jews. In the eighth and ninth chapters of this book, Gabriel explains apocalyptic visions. Most interesting is the second appearance in which he prophesizes the first coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. We know that Gabriel is later given the task of sharing God's ultimate plan of salvation with Mary. ■



The Unlikely Unbeliever

Stories surrounding Jesus' birth are filled with angelic messengers. The angel Gabriel told Zechariah that John the Baptist would be born and shared God's plan with Mary. An angel explained Mary's situation to Joseph and directed him to the safety of Egypt. Then there were the hosts of angels telling shepherds in a field of Jesus' birth.

In each instance angels came bearing news from God, but one recipient was a hesitant receiver. Surprisingly, it wasn't the teenager, the simple carpenter, or the lowly shepherds. The doubter turned out to be the holy man with intimate knowledge of God's law.

Gabriel visited Zechariah as he entered the most holy of Jewish places to officiate the ritual burning of incense. Since this was a great and rare honor for a priest, Zechariah undoubtedly was feeling close to God. Deep in prayer and awestruck over the nature of his task, the angel surprised him. Zechariah was understandably afraid. But Gabriel reassured him and shared the exciting news that after years of praying, Zechariah and his wife would be parents.

Here's where things get interesting. One would imagine such a pious man would have graciously accepted God's gift. But he didn't. Zechariah doubted. He wrongly believed he had all the answers. "I am too old and so is my wife. This can't happen." Zechariah missed the point. Caught in unbelief, he focused only on the limits of scientific possibility. He was unable to accept in the infinite possibilities of a miracle.



By contrast, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds simply believed. They remained humble and accepted what by worldly standards was considered impossible. Their stories invite us to look at our own response to God. Do we think we know all the answers, pushing God's plan into spaces and places we've already designed? Or are we able to forego all the "knowns" and believe that through God, all things are possible? ■

→ GO BEYOND

No matter how worldly or wise we grow, nature is humbling. What do you notice about the world around you? Can you hear birds or insects? Do the trees or flowers look particularly beautiful or delicate? What signs of nature can you point out to your children? Sharing nature with them is a great way to teach the awesome power and possibility of God. ■



Joseph's Story

When picturing a Nativity scene, you might first imagine Jesus with Mary at his side. Only then might you insert the stoic figure of Joseph. Strong, silent, and tucked into the background, Joseph assumes his place in the Christmas story. But on closer inspection, you might be surprised by how much you and he have in common and how important he was to God's plan.



Most of what we know about Joseph is written in Matthew's Gospel. We meet him first as he learns of Mary's pregnancy. Having heard the story so often, it's easy to forget that he was just an ordinary man planning a simple married life. Then out of nowhere comes earth-shaking, life-altering news. We tend to gloss over Joseph's story. We jump ahead to images of Bethlehem and the impending birth. But by doing so, we miss the story of a very real and relatable man.

It all begins with that baby news. From Matthew's account, it's pretty clear that Joseph isn't interested in being anyone's foster father. Considering the implications, who could blame him? Accepting Mary and this child would likely subject him to a lifetime of eye-rolls, judgments, and jokes. Add to this the hurt of feeling betrayed by someone you love, and we begin to see shades of how we ourselves might have reacted. Joseph was only human. In his pain, he planned a quiet divorce and hoped to escape the situation.

The fact is, if Joseph had stopped there, Mary would have been in real danger. Her community would probably have

demanding that she be stoned on the charge of adultery. In all likelihood, that would have been the end of the story.

But that's not how things ended. Amidst his human frailty and pain, Joseph listened to God. The words of an angel gave him pause. He turned anger into grace and became a model of courage and compassion. He also earned his place in the history of Salvation. Joseph's acceptance of Mary saved both her and her unborn baby's life. Through his humility, Joseph made Jesus' story, and our Salvation possible. ■

Memorare to St. Joseph



The *Memorare* is a prayer we often associate with Mary. There is also a form of this prayer dedicated to Saint Joseph.

Remember, O most chaste spouse of the Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who implored your help and sought your intercession were left unassisted. Full of confidence in your power I fly unto you and beg your protection.

Despise not O Guardian of the Redeemer my humble supplication, but in your bounty, hear and answer me.

Amen.

→ GO BEYOND

How do you behave in difficult or painful situations? How might you turn feelings of anger, self-pity, and hurt into moments of grace? Think of Joseph as a model for a compassionate response. ■

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