

The Good News of St. Matthew's Genealogy

Colleagues,

I trust that most all of you know who Marcus Felde is. If not, you should. These days he edits our quarterly Crossings newsletter. He's a long-serving member of the Crossings Board. And if you follow his occasional text studies in our weekly Sabbatheology series, you'll know what I mean when I say that he makes words dance like nobody I've ever known with the possible exception of his teacher and mine, the late Robert W. Bertram.

Marcus's main job is to serve as pastor to the saints of Bethlehem Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Indianapolis. Some days ago he sent us a sermon he preached there on the first Sunday after Christmas. I read, I learned. I asked him to let us share it with all of you, and he graciously consented. So here it is. St. Matthew says of the wise men that, when they saw the star, "they joyed a mega-joy—and then some!" (2:10). I'm guessing you'll taste a bit of that joy too when you see what Marcus makes of the passage that launches Matthew's Gospel. I, for one, am forever cured of the folly of treating that recital of names as boring and negligible. You might say that I'm a wiser man than I was. Thanks, Marcus!

By the way, I hear from Cathy Lessmann, the person who makes Crossings events happen, that there's still lots of room in the inn that's housing the forthcoming Crossings conference. January 26-29, at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows, Belleville, Illinois, just across the river from St. Louis. Two reasons for [signing up](#), if you haven't done so yet: a) you'll get a fuller set of specs on the good news Marcus talks about in his sermon—news designed to increase your joy in Christ, and to

bolster your own calling as an emissary to “the nations”; b) you’ll meet the bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, who has just penned one of the most refreshing and important pieces that readers of the ELCA’s *The Lutheran* has seen in that publication for a very long time. [Here it is.](#)

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

The church year 2013-14 is the year of Matthew. Most Sundays, we will be reading from Matthew. This began already in Advent.

On the First Sunday of Christmas the appointed gospel is the story of the slaughter of the innocents. But, hold on. Why is the opening of the Gospel never read, never proclaimed? This year, I experimentally offered another option for the First Sunday of Christmas. This was my sermon.

**“Happy Days Are Here Again” A sermon for the First Sunday of Christmas (using an alternative Gospel reading), December 29, 2013.
Pastor Felde, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, Indiana.**

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.²Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, ⁴and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, 7and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, 8and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, 9and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, 10and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, 11and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

12And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, 14and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, 15and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, 16and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

17So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

In the name of Jesus.

I could be wrong, but I think the opening lines of the gospel of Matthew, which look like a dusty old genealogy of Jesus, are a thesis statement. They let us know what Matthew is about to proclaim to us: Jesus is good news!

I say I could be wrong, but I'm not the first person to come up with it. [*The International Critical Commentary by Davies and*

Allison refers to this interpretation. The Albright commentary on Matthew in the Anchor series gives it short shrift.] The idea would never have occurred to me, though, if I had not served a while as a missionary in Papua New Guinea.

The key verse is 1:17:

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

The crucial word in that verse is “fourteen.”

I don't have time to tell you what commentators make of the obvious fact that Matthew labors to fit the pedigree of Jesus into three fourteen-generation spans. I'll just barely have time to tell you my own theory. And I'm telling you not as a matter of lecturing you, but because it is one way Matthew tells us the good news about Jesus.

Until I lived in the remote highlands of Papua New Guinea, the number fourteen meant nothing to me. That was because I had zero awareness of the phases of the moon. I did not think “lunarly,” although I lived in a culture which still observes a seven-day week (a quarter of a moon) and likes to pay people “fortnight”ly (that's a contraction of fourteennight). Our culture prefers to divide the year evenly into twelve, so our months have lost their synchronicity with the moon, even though “month” comes from “moon.” The first of the month is no longer, as it used to be, an actual new moon.

In Papua New Guinea I learned from local people that their weather is much affected by the phases of the moon, more than by the sun—which is a constant in the tropics. I could avoid muddy

slogs in the jungle by planning any long walk around the full moon. I was not surprised to learn that their number system uses a base of fourteen. Not ten or twelve. Fourteen. They count in fourteens. We're talking congregational meetings in which finances got explained to the older people using that system!

Reading the genealogy in Matthew 1, I began to suspect that the number fourteen might refer to the phases of the moon. People in Matthew's day were probably also very moon-conscious.

But a month has twenty-eight days, right? Well, during roughly fourteen days the moon is becoming brighter, waxing. Seven days waxing crescent (less than half), seven waxing gibbous (more than half). Then, for about fourteen days, the moon is disappearing, waning. Seven days waning gibbous, seven days—approximately—waning crescent, until it disappears at the new moon. Then, it starts over. (Check out the diagram [included in the body of this e-mail].)

Breaking the month in half in a manageable way, the fourteenth of the month is the full moon. Passover is celebrated, for example, at twilight on the fourteenth day of the month. At the full moon!

Matthew 1 presents the genealogy of the Messiah in this way: Fourteen generations passed while God worked with his people, starting from scratch with a promise to Abraham in the land of Ur, going to the high point of the anointed King David, who

brought Israel to its acme of peace, prosperity, and influence, expanding its boundaries to their greatest extent ever. Fourteen generations. The waxing of the kingdom. David represents the full moon.

Then, over fourteen generations, Israel suffered in many ways by being divided and conquered, until, at its very lowest point, the cream of Judah were deported to Babylon. God's kingdom reached its nadir. Fourteen generations, the waning of the kingdom. Exile represented the absence of light with the new moon. (Perhaps deterioration is represented at the onset of this section of the genealogy by the fact that David was succeeded by a son who was born to him by someone else's wife!)

Finally, at this end of time, Matthew proclaims, another fourteen generations have produced a new Anointed One, the new Messiah, to whom—as Jesus says in Matthew 28—"all authority in heaven and on earth has been given." Fourteen generations of God working anew amid his people, the nation growing back not just to its former glory but to unimaginable, even universal influence and glory. Because, here is Jesus! The moon is once again full, on the fourteenth day "generation" after the deportation.

Represented in the lordship of Jesus who, by the way, in Matthew is frequently called "Son of David"!

Thus what at first glance looks like just a list of ancestors is in fact a way of proclaiming that God's anointed one was present to fulfill completely all that God had been doing since Abraham. Things had gotten better and better, things had gotten worse and worse, but now—everything would be all right, because Jesus is king. The moon waxed, then waned, then waxed again. Fourteen, fourteen, fourteen. According to Matthew, this is the gospel.

This reading of the genealogy as good news is a good way of

reminding us all that the gospel of Matthew *is* good news. It is all about something wonderful that has happened in Jesus, which has happened to all of us. It begins with a sort of numerical-astronomical analysis of the Jesus event, and it ends with this: "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Jesus was born to be "Immanuel," "God with us." That is why he confirms at the end of the book that God is not departing. The glory is not going out of Israel, this time. The righteousness and peace Jesus brought are not disappearing. God is faithful. God is staying with us, with all of us. These are halcyon days! The moon is bright! Jesus is the light of the world! Party on! Believe!

Midway through the book, Matthew quotes Isaiah to describe what is happening in Jesus:

*Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.
I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.
He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.
And in his name the Gentiles will hope.*

This is great news for all the people in the world.

As I preach Matthew for a year, I hope I will always be able to stick to this main thesis. Because it will be tempting sometimes, in reading Matthew, to turn it into a guidebook for us to know what to do so we can make the world a better place, when in fact it is not a guidebook but a searchlight, trained on what God has done, not on what we might do.

Jesus prayed (see chapter 11): “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants: yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. **Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.**” This is the Messiah of Matthew’s gospel, good news for dispirited people who have hoped, and lost hope, but have found a new and everlasting hope.

Amen.