

## Beginnings: From Bethlehem to Nazareth (1:1—4:11)

The First Gospel begins at the beginning. The opening words in Greek are *biblos geneseōs Iēsou Christou*, literally, “the book of genesis [beginning, creation, birth] of Jesus Christ” (1:1). *Biblos geneseōs* may serve as the title for the whole Gospel, name the opening chapters narrating everything leading up to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (1:1—4:11), introduce the material telling of Jesus’ origins and infancy (1:1—2:23), or only start the genealogy that immediately follows the verse (1:2-17). Regardless, the reference to the beginning of God’s story with God’s people is unmistakable. From the first stroke of his stylus, Matthew connects the story of Jesus Christ with the whole of God’s story told in Hebrew scripture. Preachers should always keep this wide angle view of salvation history in mind when focusing on individual passages in this Gospel.

In 1:1—4:11, Matthew prepares the reader to encounter Jesus through the works of his ministry and teaching, death, and resurrection, by introducing his very character as God’s messiah through stories leading up to and through his birth and childhood (1:1—2:23) and preparation for ministry (3:1—4:11). The connections with Israel’s ancestry, the numerous messianic titles, and the density of prophecy fulfillment citations in these chapters set the christological tone for the whole of Matthew’s story. Put differently, these chapters are no mere prelude to what follows in the Gospel (as has been asserted by scholars in the past). Instead, all of the stories that follow these opening chapters unpack the theological conception of Jesus as the Christ offered here. Nowhere is this more evident than in the fact that before Jesus is born, Matthew announces that he is Emmanuel, God with us (1:23, from Isaiah 7:14), and at the end of the Gospel the risen Christ promises to be with his disciples “always, to the end of the age” (28:20). In all stories in-between, therefore, (without reading in trinitarian theology that developed centuries later in the church) whatever we see Jesus doing, we see God doing. In Jesus’s actions and teachings, in his

very person, we see God’s salvific presence. To help a congregation get a sense of central christological emphases of the First Gospel, a preachers should not only spend time focusing on the language and images offered in the opening chapters and found in lections that are used early in the liturgical year but can also reference them often while preaching on other passages in Matthew with similar emphases throughout Year A.

## BEGINNINGS: JESUS’ BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD (1:1—2:23)

### *INTRODUCTION*

This section is commonly labeled a “birth narrative” (see 1:18), similar to Luke 1:1—2:40. But in truth this is a misnomer. There is a lot of detail about Jesus’ lineage, the betrothal of Joseph and Mary in relation to her pregnancy, and the response to Jesus’ birth by the Magi and Herod, but technically speaking there is no birth scene. The birth is certainly reported; it is just not narrated (which is why the gospel reading for Christmas Eve/Day is drawn from Luke 2 every year and not Matthew even in Year A). Matthew’s interest here is not in establishing biographical facts, other than presenting Jesus as born in Bethlehem and growing up in Nazareth—biographical details we also find in Luke. What is at stake instead is theological: connecting Jesus as messiah with a lineage extending through David to Abraham, showing Jesus’ coming as the fulfillment of God’s prophecies in the Hebrew Bible, and naming the significance of his coming through the use of various titles and a geographically-oriented midrash of the Moses/exodus story. In other words, this section is thoroughly christological in intent, not historical, and thus stories related to Jesus’ birth are told even if the birth itself is mentioned only in passing.

This section can be outlined as follows:

1:1-17 Genealogy

1:18—2:23 – Infancy

18a – Heading

18b-25 – Parents’ Response to the Birth Beforehand

2:1-23 – Magi and King’s Response to Birth Afterward

---

*PASSAGE OMITTED FROM THE LECTIONARY*

The RCL gives much attention to the infancy stories, but omits the genealogy altogether. Lists of “begats” do not usually make exciting texts to read in liturgy and on which to preach. But this genealogy is key to understanding Matthew’s christology and especially the scandal of Jesus’ being born of a woman who got pregnant out of wedlock. The genealogy is structured in three series of fourteen generations, from Abraham to David, to the exile, to Jesus. As Christ, Jesus is not only the son of David, with whom God made a covenant concerning the rule of Israel, but also the son of Abraham, with whom God made the covenant establishing the people of Israel in the first place. The numerological construct conveys that God has chosen and prepared for the time of this birth. Jesus is no mere coincidence of history—he is the eschatological culmination of history. And God has chosen his birth to occur through the virgin Mary, in the same way that God continued blessing Israel through a scandalous woman forced to take the role of a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law in order to have a child (Tamar, v. 3), a prostitute who betrayed her people of Jericho in order to assist the invading Hebrews (Rahab, v. 5), a Moabite widow of an Israelite, who seduced her husband’s kin so he would marry her according to Levirate marriage customs (Ruth, v. 5), and a woman seduced by David himself while her husband was fighting David’s war (the wife of Uriah, v. 6). Jesus Christ is the epitome of the cliché, “God works in mysterious ways,” and Matthew’s story is a narrative through which we can interpret and proclaim those ways (1:1-17).

---



---

*LECTIONS*

The three lections taken from this section of Matthew are really parts of one intricate narrative. Repeated vocabulary, themes, and structures link all of the scenes of chapters 1–2 together. The three passages are, however, read neither on three consecutive liturgical occasions (with Christmas Eve/Day lections coming from Luke 2) nor in sequence during the liturgical year (the order is Advent 4—1:18-25; Christmas 1—2:13-23; Epiphany—2:1-12). In sermons on these three passages, preachers will need to reference the connections explicitly

to enhance the cumulative effect of preaching from Matthew during this early part of the church year.

---

LECTION: THE BIRTH OF JESUS  
1:18–25; ADVENT 4

Preachers may experience two very different hurdles as they approach this text.<sup>1</sup> The first is that congregations have heard it so many times, they already know (or at least they think they already know) what it is about. The second is that the passage is so chock-full of theological goodness that it is difficult to pick a singular homiletical focus.

While Luke focuses on Mary as the active parent in dialogue with the angel of the Lord, Matthew chooses Joseph. As interesting as Luke's choice of using the female character is, so is Matthew's choice of emphasizing the faithfulness of the non-father in the role of Jesus' birth. Joseph is a righteous man whom Matthew presents as presuming Mary to be unfaithful when she is found to be pregnant. But an epiphany sets him straight and he obediently takes Mary as his wife and serves as Jesus' legal father, even to the point of accepting the responsibility for naming in accordance with God's will.

Preachers will do well to invite their congregation to identify with Joseph. He is, however, neither the focus of the scene nor its main character. Anybody who has ever been in a play knows that the primary characters get the most lines. Joseph does not speak. Instead, the angel of the Lord and Isaiah speak. The focus is what they speak about: the coming messiah. On the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the congregation should be located where Joseph is: learning who the child is that is about to be born. Preachers attend to lesser elements of the story if they attend primarily to Joseph's epiphanic experience and his response of obedience. A sermon on this text will not ordinarily be ethical in character (that is, concerned with the congregation's behavior being modeled on Joseph's), but christological, even while it continues the eschatological emphasis that dominates Advent.

Notice all that is told of this child in this space of a few short verses.

He is of divine origin (conceived by the Holy Spirit) (vv. 18, 21). Again, while we should not read later Trinitarian claims into this language, we should recognize that this language is one of the sources used to make that claim.

1. All liturgical dates refer to Year A of the RCL in which Matthew is the primary Gospel read unless otherwise specified.

At the same time that Jesus is from God, he will be the son of David (a messianic title as well as a genealogical descriptor) by virtue of being claimed as Joseph's son (v. 20). This language connects the scene with the genealogy in 1:1-17.

His name is symbolic of his role: Jesus (a common Jewish name (Greek for the Hebrew Joshua, derived from the verb to "save") will save his people from their sins (v. 22). Matthew does not at this point specify who "his people" are or what "their sins" are. By virtue of following the genealogy, the reader is set up to assume "his people" is Israel. This is certainly true, but as the narrative of the Gospel unfolds with its attention on the sick, the poor, the tax collectors, the oppressed and finally the gentiles, we will find this assumption to be too limited. Differently, contemporary readers are likely to assume that Matthew's understanding of sin is individual based on individualistic themes in contemporary society and individualistic readings of Paul's theology of justification. Clearly here, though, sin is corporate. Thus the salvation Jesus is to bring is social and political (even cosmic) in nature.

Jesus is the fulfillment of scripture. Vv. 22-23 comprise the first of many prophecy fulfillment citations in Matthew.

The prophetic text which Jesus fulfills is Isaiah 7:14. As commentators on both Matthew and Isaiah will point out, in the original Hebrew text the emphasis is not on a virgin birth, but simply on a symbolic birth. The LXX translation of the Hebrew changed "young woman" to "virgin." This translation was used to shape the story of Mary as Jesus' mother. But Matthew's emphasis is not on Mary; it is on Jesus as Emmanuel. Not only does Jesus come *from* God, Jesus will manifest God's presence *with* the people he is coming to save from their sins.

The preacher would do well on the Fourth Sunday of Advent to begin the sermon with claims that we all already know this story, quickly narrate it again in almost ho-hum tones (locating the congregation to see with Joseph's perspective), and then pan out to show the congregation just how much christological theology is packed into this little scene. This will allow preachers to raise the question of Christ's eschatological, saving presence in today's world.

LECTURE: THE MAGI:  
2:1-12; EPIPHANY, YEARS ABC

The lectionary preacher has several significant problems when wanting to effect a hearing of Matthew's story of the Magi. The first is that, as we have named, this passage is not an isolated pericope that stands alone. It is the first half

of chapter 2, which is a lengthy (in Synoptic Gospel terms), complex story. As with chapter 1, chapter 2 as a whole is focused on christology but the christological lenses have switched from lineage and messianic titles to politics and geography. A second problem that is related to the first is that in the lectionary cycle, we read the two parts of Matthew 2 in reverse order. On the First Sunday of Christmas we read the second half of the story (Herod's slaughter of the innocent), and then on Epiphany (or Epiphany Sunday—the Sunday before January 6) we read this story. A third problem is that because the story of the magi is associated with the feast of Epiphany, tradition pushes us to preach the passage in terms of the first revelation of the Christ to the gentiles. While this is an element of the story, it is not the primary focus for Matthew.

Matthew 2 unpacks the political significance of having demonstrated that Jesus is the “son of David” in chapter 1. We often think of Luke as the Gospel most interested in a social, political agenda, but Matthew here from the beginning also shows that the birth of Jesus as the Christ, Son of God and Son of David, has significant political ramifications. Herod is the bad guy in the story, but he is also absolutely correct in his assessment of the situation: Jesus is a threat to his power, Jesus' birth (and the reign of God he will proclaim as arriving) is a challenge to Caesar's empire. Herod knows that when the mage call Jesus a king, they are right. It is cliché for preachers to say that Jesus was not the kind of Messiah expected in Second Temple Judaism. He does not assemble an army to overthrow Rome; he does not try to take the throne; and he does not try to reestablish Israel as an empire. This is all true. But none of this means that his preaching, his healings, his associations, his critique of religious leaders (who benefitted from the empire's benevolence toward them while oppressing others), his death and his resurrection were not a condemnation of and attempt to transform the status quo. Indeed, in this story, Jesus is a passive infant—his very being, not just his later actions, is a challenge to the powers-that-be.

But the fact that a star announces Jesus' birth shows that Matthew interprets the reach of Jesus' impact as going far beyond the political borders (and thus power) of Herod in Judea. The appearance of a star was a common element in legends concerning the birth of a new emperor. But Jesus' star even appears beyond the bounds of the empire. It appears “in the east,” an intentionally ambiguous term pointing to an oriental location outside the “western,” Roman purview. Jesus' will save his people from their sins, that is, he will liberate his people from oppression with a global, or better, cosmic impact.

The magi, then, are not the main characters of the story. They serve to bring the conflict of the story forward. As eastern (gentile) magicians, they are odd choices to bring news (in the form of a question) to Herod that a new king

of the Jews has been born. They are not kings as the Christmas carol says. In fact, the Bible consistently looks down on *magoi* (for example, consider Simon and Bar-Jesus in Acts 8 and 13). Yet, similar to the night-shift shepherds in Luke's birth narrative (Lk 2:8–20), God has revealed the birth to and through these undesirables. Jesus is of scandalous lineage, born of a virgin, and now given testimony by palm readers and horoscope writers—God works through mysterious ways. Moreover, the obedient response of the magi to the angel (coupled with Joseph and Mary's obedience) serves as a model for readers while Herod's machinations reveal the lengths to which those in power will go to destroy good news from reaching those under their power.

Preachers may naturally ask their congregation to identify with the magi, inviting them to respond to the good news of who Jesus is in similar fashion. The theological focus of an Epiphany sermon, however, should not usually be on those who receive the revelation. It should be on the one revealed, on the character and impact of the revelation. In other words, a sermon on this text will be christological, but it should also be political. The sociopolitical claims of the text should expand a congregation's view of the salvation God brings through Christ *and* should call for a response to those claims that require something different of us than it did of the magi. As the church on the post-resurrection side of hearing this story, we cannot be content with going home by a different way to protect the newborn king. As Christ's church (see 16:18), we must confront the oppressive and destructive powers of the world empowered by the saving presence of God-with-us.

LECTION: CONFLICT BETWEEN TWO KINGS  
2:13–23; CHRISTMAS 1

Preaching on the story of the slaughter of the innocents on the First Sunday of Christmas is difficult because the narration of the scene in Matthew presumes the story already told in 2:1–12, which the congregation will not hear in worship until the celebration of Epiphany. The preacher will have to remind the congregation of this story without going into an in-depth interpretation that upstages visiting the Gospel lesson on Epiphany.

As with the story of the magi's visit to Herod and then to Jesus, this story for Matthew is primarily christological. It raises the stakes of the political nature of the Christ event in a number of ways. Most striking is the use of midrash in telling the story as an echo of the story of Moses and the exodus. Midrash draws on elements of a known story and refigures them to tell a new story. In midrash, the elements shared between the stories need not be exactly

parallel (say, in the way in an allegory each element lines up symbolically with a reference). The point of reframing the elements in a new way is not to say this is the same story with the same meaning as the older, referenced story. Indeed, midrash works more like metaphor than allegory: the new story is *and* is not like the reference story. The intent of midrash is that by drawing older, familiar elements into a new story, the older story influences the interpretation of the new one. Hearers/readers are struck by both the similarities and the differences so that new (parabolic) insight is gained. So Herod killing all boys under the age of two in Bethlehem (similar to Pharaoh killing all newborn males in Exodus 1:15-22), Jesus escaping the slaughter (as Moses was saved in Exodus 2:1-10), and Jesus being called out of Egypt (as God used Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt in Ex 12ff), all point to Jesus as a political liberator like Moses. But following on the heels of chapter 1, it is clear that Jesus is more than Moses. Jesus is the Moses-like messiah, who is also the Son of David and Son of God.

Remember that while God was working through Moses in Egypt (before the first Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea), the oppression and suffering of the Israelites was increased by Pharaoh. This is the reality of evil's response to God's presence. So we should not be surprised to find that the good news of the birth of the messiah is met with horrific violence by those who have benefitted from the hierarchical political and economic structures of society. The advent of Christ does not mean the removal of evil from the world. Indeed, in this scene the birth of the Son of God is the impetus for violence.

To be sure, Matthew presents God as being in control through the angel's interventions and instructions. But we should be clear. God is in control, not of all events in the scene, but specifically of Jesus' destiny. Notice that the scripture fulfillment formula is different in this scene than in the others in chapters 1-2. Elsewhere, Matthew says that such and such happens *so that* (Greek *hina*) the word of the Lord through the prophet was fulfilled. In v. 18, Matthew quotes Jeremiah, a text that when heard in isolation this way is filled with angst and grief. In v. 17 Matthew does not say that those two year old and younger boys were killed "so that" this scripture would be fulfilled. The narrator simply says, "Then [Greek *tote*] was fulfilled what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet." In other words, for Matthew the slaughter of the innocents is a fulfillment of scripture but not of God's will, in that scripture often names that which resists God's desire for the world. The good news is that God's providence is overarching and the likes of Herod cannot stop what is planned for Jesus. (Ironically, God protects Jesus from being killed at this point so that he can be killed at the right time, as a ransom for many, 20:28). The reality,



though, is that Herod can still do a lot of damage along the way. Jesus has come to save God's people, but if this passage is to be taken seriously, that salvation will occur *in the midst of* the struggle between good and evil in the world, not in the creation of a utopia that does not match our experience of reality.

This is not an easy text to preach during the twelve days of Christmas, but it is important not to ignore or avoid it. Despite the carols playing on the radio, the greens hanging in the sanctuary, the parties, and the gift-giving, the holiday season celebrating the nativity is not without pain and turmoil. Every pastor knows that addiction, mental illness, and family dysfunctions cause increased problems in the lives of their parishioners during this "joyous" season. In spite of the fact that individuals and churches feel good (and should feel good) about all the food and clothes charities with which they participate during the holiday season, huge numbers of people sleep in the cold on the streets during Christmastide, just like the rest of the year and about 80% of the population worldwide live on less than ten dollars a day. Even though we sing peace on earth and goodwill to all, wars, ethnic cleansing, gang violence, and infanticide do not take a break from December 25 through January 6.

The good news to be proclaimed is that God's providence and salvation through Christ is not erased by such tragic circumstances, by horrific violence. The good news is that Christ was born into just such a world to save us from these sins. The good news is that this good news is not proclaimed as pie-in-the-sky theology that does not take the real world seriously. But in preaching this good news, preachers should not pass too quickly over the pathos of the scene. Many congregants will find the honesty of naming suffering and despair in the face of "Joy to the World" instead of the denial asked of them by most of the world liberating in and of itself.

## BEGINNINGS: PREPARATION FOR MINISTRY (3:1–4:11)

### INTRODUCTION

A significant shift in setting sets off this section from the previous one. A shift in time is signaled with the words, "In those days" that opens this new section (3:1). While the words mark a new phase in the narrative they are (intentionally?) ambiguous. How much time has passed since Joseph brought Jesus and Mary back from Egypt and settled in Nazareth? The place is also ambiguous: "the wilderness of Judea." Wilderness is a symbolic space of isolation. In isolation is danger but also the potential of revelation from God.

This section opens with John preaching and baptizing in the wilderness and closes with Jesus being tested in the wilderness.

Here Matthew continues to develop the christological approach of the infancy stories by giving us new insight into the character and purpose of Jesus, especially in the words of John the Baptist in 3:11-12 and with the heavenly voice speaking at his baptism (3:17). But with Jesus now in adulthood, the stories also set the stage for Jesus to begin his eschatological ministry. Jesus prepares by being baptized by John and being led by the Spirit to be tested by Satan.

---

*LECTIONS*

The RCL uses all parts of this section in Year A, dividing it appropriately into three passages. The three passages appear in order early in Advent, early in the Season after Epiphany, and early in Lent.

---

**LECTION: THE MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST  
3:1-12; ADVENT 2**

It is intriguing that the New Testament church's proclamation of Jesus as the messiah begins consistently with one who is not the messiah—John the Baptist. The early church struggled with the relationship of Jesus and John because Jesus being baptized by John makes it appear as if Jesus was John's disciple, that John was the greater of the two. So the Gospel writers needed to show continuity between the ministries of the two without presenting Jesus as John's subordinate or presenting them as equals and needed to interpret Jesus' baptism as something other than placing Jesus under the authority of John. (Compare Matthew's approach with Luke's. Luke 1-2 presents Jesus birth story as paralleling John's, but consistently shows that Jesus is the greater of the two. Then Luke 3:18-22 presents Jesus' baptism *after* having already told of John's imprisonment.)

Matthew adapts Mark's presentation of John and the baptism of Jesus in different ways to achieve these two goals. Like Mark 1:2-3, Matthew quotes scripture to identify John as the forerunner of Jesus—as the one who prepares the way of the Lord—while cleaning up Mark's conflation of words from Exodus, Malachi and Isaiah and assigning them all to Isaiah (v. 3). And like Mark 1:4-6, Matthew describes John in ways that make him appear to be the

return of Elijah (clothing, food, location), which was popularly believed to occur before the coming of the messiah (vv. 1, 4). Matthew, like Luke, adds to Mark's account in John's own mouth testimony to Jesus ("one coming after me") as greater than he is (vv. 7-12). (For ways that Matthew adapts Mark's version of the baptism story to accomplish these goals, see the commentary on the next passage.)

But Matthew also adds something unique that is found in neither Mark nor Luke. He summarizes John's preaching with the exact words he later uses to summarize the preaching of Jesus and the disciples: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (v. 2; cf. 4:17; 10:7). (See the Introduction and the comments on 4:12-25 below for a fuller exploration of the concept of the "reign of heaven.") For Matthew, then, the difference between John and Jesus is not their message but the role they play in relation to that message. In his address to the Pharisees and Sadducees, John *announces* the coming judgment. Jesus, on the other hand, *is* the eschatological judgment. John baptizes with water (like cleansing in the form of washing the surface of something), but Jesus baptizes with fire (like purification in the form of refining or smelting metal to remove unwanted elements).

This new christological portrayal of Jesus as judge may seem at odds with the angel's claim that Jesus is to save his people from their sins (1:21), but in truth salvation and judgment are two poles of the same magnet. Many of us pastors like to preach about justice but avoid any talk of divine judgment. If God decides between what is just and unjust, then God is judge. If God decides that we need to be saved from our sin and liberated from oppression, then God has judged our sinfulness and our situation as not according with God's will. God's mercy and love are meaningless, if God cannot choose to see us and our situations in different ways. For Matthew, to meet and know Christ is to be judged and saved at the same time. The proper response is repentance. This theological claim and existential response will need to be central to an Advent sermon on this lection.

It is important to notice who comes out to be baptized by John. Matthew says the people of Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all of the region around the Jordan (vv. 5-6). Recall that "all of Jerusalem" was troubled with Herod at the news of the birth of a new king (2:3). Both in the earlier scene and here, Matthew uses hyperbole to show the level of impact the birth pangs of the Gospel are having at the center of Israel's religious and political life. This also shows that Matthew is not anti-Jewish. John seems to accept the repentance of and baptize all these people. It is only the religious leaders with whom he takes issue. And although preachers often speak of such leaders as adversaries of Jesus who challenge and

attack him in the Gospels, in Matthew they are not the ones to strike the first blow. John challenges them, not the other way around. This sets the stage for Jesus to do the same (for example, see Jesus' similar use of "brood of vipers" and "good fruit" when addressing the Pharisees in 12:33-34.)

This is not an easy text to preach in Advent or any other season. The difficulty is not in identifying what is emphasized in the text but because what is emphasized is so clear. The problem is that what is emphasized is so hard to hear and to respond to appropriately. Three points of identification invite three different sermons in relation to eschatological advent of judgment/salvation and the invitation to repent. The easiest approach may be to ask our congregation to identify with the faceless crowds who come out to be baptized by John. By doing so, we call our hearers as individuals to prepare for the coming of Christ with repentance and confession of sins. In other words we call them to change their lives and to be open to Christ changing their lives.

Second, if we ask the congregation to identify with the religious leaders, we must be willing to name honestly that we religious folks may be the ones most challenged by Jesus' coming. We have domesticated the gospel into polite news for the middle class instead of being saved by confrontation with our judge. In a sense, this identification leads to the same kind of sermon as the first but with a stronger call to reflect on the need for the *church* to repent, not just the individuals gathered into it.

Third, we can also ask the congregation to identify with John himself, placing ourselves in the role of those who are to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord, the arrival of the saving judge who baptizes with fire and the Holy Spirit. In this case, we call the church (and individuals within it) to take up a critical role toward the world, our particular society, and indeed our church. We call the church to speak words of judgment and work radically for justice *so that* all might know God's forgiving and providential care.

LECTURE: THE BAPTISM OF JESUS  
3:13-17; BAPTISM OF THE LORD

As noted in the discussion of the previous passage, the early church struggled with the relationship of Jesus and John because Jesus' baptism makes it seem as if Jesus was John's disciple. So the Gospel writers needed to show continuity between the ministries of the two without presenting Jesus as John's subordinate or presenting them as equals and needed to interpret Jesus' baptism as something other than placing Jesus under the authority of John. John's own proclamation

about the one coming after him dealt with the first issue (3:7–10). The second is dealt with in this pericope.

In Mark's version of the baptism, the voice that calls Jesus God's Son makes it clear that Jesus is more than a disciple of John's (Mark 1:11), but there is still a question of why Jesus responded to John's message of repentance and a baptism for the forgiveness of sins at all. Did Jesus need to be cleansed of sin? Matthew inserts into Mark's version of the scene a dialogue between John and Jesus in which John resists baptizing Jesus because Jesus is the greater of the two. Jesus responds by saying that he needs to be baptized to "fulfill all righteousness" (3:14–15). These are the first words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, and they are loaded, yet ambiguous, words.

"Righteousness" (Greek: *dikaïosunē*) and its cognate "righteous" (Greek: *dikaïos*) are key terms for Matthew. "Righteousness" is never used in Mark and only once in Luke (Luke 1:75) while in Matthew it shows up in the mouth of Jesus seven times (Matt. 3:15; 5:6, 10, 20; 6:1 {the NRSV poorly translates *dikaïosunē* here as "piety"}, 33; 21:32). Similarly, "righteous" appears in Matthew twelve times without parallels in Mark or Luke. Scholars are not in agreement about Matthew's nuanced understanding of the concept of righteousness. We can say that to be righteous or to possess righteousness in Matthew is related to observing the Torah but not limited to it. To be righteous is to be an ethical, good person, but it is more than that. The righteous are juxtaposed to sinners. The righteous are paired with but not equated to prophets. Jesus came for the sinners instead of the righteous but nonetheless called his followers to be righteous. So when Jesus is fulfilling all righteousness by being baptized, Matthew is not making a claim about his need for repentance or forgiveness. Instead, he presents Jesus as setting an example for the church, not simply a ritual example but one that leads *us* to recognizing our sins and reorienting our lives toward the good.

While the dialogue between John and Jesus is key for understanding what is at stake for Matthew in this passage, it will probably be in the background instead of the center of a sermon on Jesus' baptism. Clearly, the emphasis in the story is on the epiphany that occurs when God's Spirit descends on him and the heavenly voice announces that he is the God's beloved Son. In Mark 1:11, the voice speaks only to Jesus: "*You* are my Son, the Beloved; with *you* I am well pleased." But in Matthew the voice speaks of Jesus in the third person: "*This* is my Son, the Beloved, with *whom* I am well pleased" (v. 17). Matthew presents the epiphany as public. Presumably John and "the people of Jerusalem and all Judea...and all the region along the Jordan" (3:5) heard God's testimony to the true identity of Jesus. This statement is the narrative climax of the christological

focus of the entirety of 1:1—4:11. What the angel declared to Joseph, what the magi understood the star to mean, what the prophetic texts confirm, and what John himself proclaimed is now summed up once for all in God's own voice.

Moreover, this declaration in which God claims Jesus as God's Son stands in direct contrast to the common use of the same language in which the state claimed that the emperor was God's chosen son. So following John's challenge made to the religious leaders whose privilege rests on Roman authority in the previous passage, this scene continues Matthew's undercurrent that the person and ministry of Jesus as God's Son is a challenge to socio-political status quo.

Given what we have said, there are two significantly different sermonic approaches invited by this text that fit well with a celebration of Baptism of the Lord. The first involves a christological focus that accords both with Matthew's christological emphasis throughout the early part of his narrative and with the epiphany theme of the manifestation of God's Christ. In such a sermon, the preacher could proclaim (perhaps in a way that draws together the christological threads woven through Advent, Christmastide, and Epiphany sermons on Matthew) the manner in which Christ's submission to baptism and the divine voice's declaration work together to reveal the relationship of Jesus to God. It is important not to read Trinitarian theology back into Matthew, but a preacher can unpack ways this text helps the contemporary church better understand Trinitarian theology. Or, more closely connected with Matthew's own purposes, the preacher can highlight how even the "common" language used to refer to Jesus (that is, the Son of God) is a countercultural, political statement.

The second possibility is a sermon that uses Christ's baptism as a lens for interpreting the church's baptism. This is especially appropriate given the growing practice of using Baptism of the Lord as a Sunday for rituals of the renewal of baptism. This sermon requires a hermeneutical move in which what happens to Jesus in his baptism is not viewed as *sui generis* but as a model for our sacrament. This does not mean that the church baptizes because Jesus was baptized (see 28:21–20). It does assume, however, that the Gospel writers in general, and Matthew specifically, constructed the story of Jesus' baptism to accord with their community's practice and theology of Christian baptism. Assuming baptism is a conversation of sort between God on the one hand and the baptizand and the church on the other, this type of sermon draws an analogy not only between Jesus' desire to fulfill all righteousness and reasons why we should seek (and remember) baptism, but would assume as well that the divine speech concerning Jesus is analogous to the way in which God claims every person as God's own through (or witnessed to by) baptism.

LECTION: THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS  
4:1-11; LENT 1

While most of the lections from Matthew 1:1—4:11 fall in the cycle that extends from Advent to Epiphany, this last passage from the section that presents Jesus as preparing for his ministry as the messiah is read on the First Sunday in Lent. The temptation story has long been associated with Lent due to Jesus' fasting in the wilderness for forty days as a biblical model for the forty days of Lenten discipline. While this liturgical connection offers much for preaching this text on Lent 1, the distance of numerous weeks or even a couple of months between reading 3:13-17 on Baptism of the Lord and reading 4:1-11 on the Sunday after Ash Wednesday causes a literary disconnect the preacher must work to mend for hearers. This disconnect is exacerbated by what is read on the Sundays of Ordinary Time following Epiphany—passages taken from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, especially his first discourse, the Sermon on the Mount. For Matthew, the temptation story is the final story of Jesus' preparation for ministry and flows directly out of the baptism story. (Contrast the placement of the story in Luke 4:1-13 where the genealogy [3:23-38] separates the baptism [3:21-22] and temptation story so that the temptation story serves as Jesus' *first* act of ministry).

For preachers, the temptation story seems to be a ready-made three-point sermon. With one point per temptation, all you have to do is add two jokes and a poem, and you have your sermon. While focusing on the different tests the devil poses to Jesus is a perfectly legitimate exegetical and homiletical approach, I propose that attending to the context in which Matthew places this story and the similarities between the temptations offers a more focused approach to the text.

Matthew places the temptation story on the heels of the baptism story (3:13-17). In that story, Jesus goes out to be baptized by John in the wilderness, and the Spirit descends upon Jesus just before the voice announces that he is the Son of God. In this passage the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness (presumably *deeper* into the wilderness since he is already in the wilderness with John) where in the first two temptations the devil begins testing Jesus with the words, "If you are the Son of God." The wilderness, the Spirit, and the title Son of God intimately connects the temptation with the baptism. As we noted at the first mention of wilderness in 3:1, the wilderness is a symbolic space of isolation. In isolation is danger but also the potential of revelation from God. Danger and revelation may well be holding hands in the wilderness where Jesus is tested.

Here the Spirit leads Jesus into this danger. Even though the scene is thick with apocalyptic mythology, we should assume that the danger is very real.

The telling of the story may be fanciful but what is at stake is not, otherwise Matthew would not give the Spirit such a prominent place in initiating the story and fill the scene with so much scripture. What is at stake is whether Jesus will appropriately, fully, and faithfully claim his identity as God's Son. Jesus' identity, significance and purpose was revealed to Joseph and the magi before his birth. It was revealed to John and the crowd (and Jesus) at Jesus' baptism. Now Satan gives Jesus every opportunity to deny who he is, or better, whose he is. He poses the temptation as if he were giving Jesus the opportunity to fulfill his destiny, or at least to use or prove his identity: *If you are the Son of God, then . . .* But he is in reality inviting Jesus to be less than what God intends, indeed, to be Satan's instead of God's. After all, the last temptation (which does not begin with "If you are the Son of God") is the climax of the scene because the tempter invites Jesus to worship him directly (contrast Luke's order of the tests in which the temptation in Jerusalem is the final and climatic temptation [4:9-12] related to the fact that Jerusalem is at the center of the narrative and theology of Luke-Acts). The conditional clause is not necessary because the act of worshiping that which is evil, violent, decadent and oppressive would negate the messianic identity altogether.

As with the other lections from the beginning chapters of Matthew, the temptation scene is christological in terms of its theological focus. Jesus *does* claim the title of Son of God and thus dedicates himself to the healing, liberating, challenging, nonviolent, and merciful mission that is God's will for God's people. Only now is he finally ready to take up the proclamation of the advent of God's reign and the call to repentance. One will do well to preach this text with this focus as a way of preparing a congregation to hear Jesus' claims about his identity according to John in the Gospel lections that follow in the rest of Lent, even while contrasting John's christology with that of Matthew in those sermons (Lent 2: John 3:1-17; Lent 3: John 4:5-42; Lent 4 John 9:1-41; and Lent 5: John 11:1-45).

The placement of this reading at the beginning of the season in which the church is taking on Lenten disciplines and preparing catechumenes for baptism, however, also encourages the preacher to interpret Jesus' temptation as a model for the Christian struggle with temptation. In this case the passage is read ethically—that is, in terms of Christian behavior. Temptation is, for all of us all of the time, a question of who and whose we are. Thoughts of cheating, revenge, stealing, lying, and so on and so forth are really questions about whether we are God's or are possessed by something else, something less. So in one sense, Lenten disciplines are temptation practice. We are led by the Spirit to give up or take on something to test whose we are. After all, since the



Spirit led Jesus to be tested *before* his ministry began and Jesus did not give in to Satan's invitation, we can be sure that when he is in Gethsemane praying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me," he will go on to say, "yet not what I want but what you want." (26:39). We desire such strength for ourselves as well.