

## **Sunday, Dec. 7**

Pastor Steve started his Advent series in Matthew 1:1-17 and the genealogy of Jesus, which details 42 generations from Abraham to Christ. Genealogies are important in Scripture, he said. God cares about them because lineages and heritages are important to history. The Israelites were an oral tradition people before they were a written tradition people.

Here, Steve mentioned that some skeptics like to point out the genealogy in Matthew 1 is different from Luke 3. But Matthew traced the line through Christ's legal father, Joseph, while Luke gives it from the mother's side because Joseph isn't Jesus's biological father. And, in regard to the importance of genealogy, he asked how many people would be interested if someone told them they could trace their ancestry back 500 or 1,000 years.

The genealogy in Matthew covers 14 generations prior to Jesus, which is more than 1,000 years and shows the importance of Jesus coming through the lineage of Israel's history. Steve shared a story from the Wycliffe Bible Translators, about a man who worked in Papua New Guinea. As he was translating Matthew into their language, he decided to skip Matthew 1 because he didn't think anyone would care about it. However, when they completed all the other chapters and came to Matthew 1, the translator could see by the time he reached the sixth "begat" the tribe was getting excited.

"Do you mean these were real men?" one of them asked.

"Yes," the translator replied, "that's what I've been telling you."

"We didn't know that," the tribal leader said. "But now we believe."

"This chapter was the key for belief in the tribe," Steve said. "When they saw the genealogy, they knew it was real. Scripture is not a collection of fantasies. It's not a collection of good, moral principles. Believing in Christ as described in Scripture is believing in the reality that is grounded in history."

He also reviewed four names that were key to this genealogy: Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba. Women who were prostitutes, from pagan backgrounds, or were involved in illicit relations leading to the birth of Christ. Matthew makes it abundantly clear that he wasn't trying to hide the sinfulness that went on. Steve said Matthew did this because he wanted to illustrate that God is a God of grace, redemption, and fixing past mistakes.

"Jesus came to seek and to save the lost," Steve said. "People lost in their sin. It's a beautiful picture of what is happening through Jesus. I hope your heart is encouraged this morning, that you are not defined by your mistakes. You are defined by the redemption that is found in Christ."

## **Sunday, Dec. 14**

"A Tale of New Questions" contrasted Zechariah's reaction to the angel Gabriel's message with Mary's, based on Luke 1:5-38.

Pastor Steve started with the priest seeing an angel when he is performing duties in the temple: "He sees Gabriel and is overcome by the fear that all humans feel in the presence of one of God's messengers. He's told, 'Don't be afraid, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth is going to bear a son, that's going to bring joy and

gladness.”

You would think this news would bring joy; instead Zechariah reacts with skepticism. Steve said Zechariah was essentially asking, “How do you expect me to do that? I’m an old man. How is this going to happen?” Steve said the tenor of Gabriel’s response is a rebuke; he tells Zechariah that he will be unable to speak until the baby is born because he did not believe.

“His doubt seems to be rooted, maybe in some cynicism that has built up under the surface of all his faithfulness to God,” Steve said. “I believe that does happen to Christians who become conditioned to believe that God comes through for others, but He’s not coming through for me... Thankfully, Elizabeth conceives and bears a son.”

Moving to the second half (vv. 26-38) of the passage, he talked about how Mary was quite young, with estimates of her age from 14 to 17. Yet she found favor in God’s sight. That she is carrying the Son of God means this is the most important pregnancy in the history of planet earth; we should never ignore or downplay this because we’re afraid of the extremes of Catholicism’s worship of Mary.

“Instead, we should recognize what Scripture is clearly telling us, and that is that this is a unique, beautiful, powerful, wonderful and holy moment,” Steve said. “God has chosen her for this beautiful, wonderful task, to be the mother of the Son of God.”

Still, she has a similar reaction to Zechariah, being greatly troubled by Gabriel’s news. Yet, there is a great difference in Mary’s response. Being a virgin, she is puzzled by how this can happen. Unlike Zechariah’s doubt, she is asking for help to help her understand the message. “She’s expecting that this will happen,” Steve said. “She is just asking for clarification.” Then comes the most poignant part of her reaction: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be according to your word.”

The difference between Zechariah’s response and Mary’s is “gigantic,” he added. In it, there is a lesson for all Christians: questions are not bad when they are rooted in faith and trust, even if you don’t understand exactly what God is doing.

## **Sunday, Dec. 21**

Pastor Steve’s final Advent message covered Scriptures pointing to three promises: 1) Christ’s coming, 2) His birth, 3) His second coming.

He started with Old Testament promises, beginning in Genesis 3:15, when God promises the serpent that although Satan will bruise the Savior’s heel, Jesus will smash his head. From there, he went on to Genesis 49:10, where Jacob said the scepter would not depart from Judah; Deuteronomy 18:15, where Moses wrote of God raising up a prophet “like me;” and 2 Samuel 7:13, which speaks of God’s throne lasting forever.

Steve read Psalm 2:7-8, which he called a “messianic Psalm” because it says the Son will rule the nations. In Isaiah 7:14, the prophet says the Son will be born of a virgin. Isaiah 9:6-7 speaks of the coming child with names like Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace. Isaiah 11:1-2 talks about someone coming who is filled with the Spirit.

After reading Jeremiah 23:5’s words about the righteous Branch of David, Steve said, “There is a constant linking in the mind of Israel that from the stump of David a branch will spring up.”

Jeremiah 33:14 and Zechariah 9:9 also says somebody is coming. “Behold your King is coming to you,” Steve characterized these prophecies. “He coming and will reign

with righteousness and justice.” After reading Isaiah 53:4-6, he added, “This is why (Jesus) is coming, not just to reign and rule. Isaiah not only predicted the virgin birth ... he told us (Jesus) would not be esteemed and our iniquity would be laid on Him.”

As for the fulfillment of prophecy, Steve pointed to Luke 1 and the story of Christ’s birth, and the story of Joseph’s dream in Matthew 1 and a quote from Isaiah. Since Matthew was writing for a Jewish audience, he wanted to make it clear Jesus was the one who had been prophesied long ago.

“The virgin birth is so important,” Steve said. “He is born of a woman and born of the Holy Spirit. He came saying, ‘I was born of a woman, so I am a man; and I am born of the Holy Spirit. It was the immaculate conception.’”

Luke 2:8-14 tells us what Jesus’s birth looked like when it happened. Steve talked of how God put on the “greatest show ever,” not for society’s elites but for lowly shepherds in the fields. Then a choir steps out and sings, “Glory to God in the highest.”

On the final point, Christ’s return, Steve mentioned verses like Matthew 24:31, when Jesus sends His angels to gather the elect; and 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18.

“When He comes back, it will be loud!” he said. “There will be crying, there will be trumpets, and the dead in Christ will arise. This is going to be wild.”

## **Sunday, Dec. 28**

Andy Magnusson’s message from Luke 2:1-20 was titled “Pax Romana, Pax Christi.” He contrasted God’s way being at complete odds with the Roman Empire and asked if anyone had received the wrong gift for Christmas. When Christ was born, many then considered Him the wrong gift at the wrong time.

“Not according to God (though),” Andy said. “Galatians 4:4 makes it very clear: when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, Jesus. But we will see this morning that God’s perspective and ... the world’s perspective many times are far apart.”

Though many thought this era marked the peak of Rome’s power, in his book on Christ and Caesar, historian Will Durant said the city was full of men who had lost their economic footing and moral stability. With such things as divorce, abortion, and adultery multiplying, the world was coming apart at the seams, Durant wrote.

Yet, after a long period of instability, Caesar Augustus (Julius’ nephew) was declared ultimate ruler and his birthday became a worldwide holiday: “In (those) days the world had everything it wanted,” Andy said. “They were full of themselves and self-sufficient. So what a foolish thing for some other God to send a gift into this world ... and then declare this gift was all about peace on earth.”

Ironically, this marked the start of Edward Gibbon’s seven-volume work on the fall of the Roman Empire. Because, while Pax Romana could rule the nations, it couldn’t conquer the human heart. And so God came with what many saw as the wrong gift—a baby. If God was going to send a gift during such times, at least make it a greater and more powerful gift than Caesar’s armies, Andy said.

“That’s the way we would do it if we were God, right?” he asked. “A God with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. A God with His dukes up, ready for a good fight. What does this God of strange surprises do? Sends a baby ... A baby who would have died without the tender care of His mother.”

Isaiah goes on in chapter 53 to call this Messiah a root out of dry ground and a tender chute. We want God to storm into our world, take our side, and destroy our enemies, Andy said. But somehow God goes on being God, giving us—or least offering to us—that which we really need.

“Shouldn’t we be jumping to our feet right now and saying, ‘I’m one of those wrong people God sent His very best gift ... to?’” he said. “I know it’s easier for me to pay lip service to that than it is to think it and feel it deep down in the bottom of my heart.”