

Credo: 2nd Series, Part One: “Yeshua”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for December 29th 2019 (Christmas Sunday)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 1: 1-17

And we’re back! Back to that multi-pronged little project I launched in late summer: that “stroll” through the Apostle’s Creed, the threads of which I hope to pick up this morning. Doing so not because holding the right “beliefs” is the only thing—or even the chief thing—that ought to mark us as disciples, but because it can be useful...

...in truth more than a little useful...

...to take the measure of the ideas that have shaped Christian community for the better part of the past 2000 years, since we all realize that ideas do have consequences.

Worth noting...worth noting from the get-go, is that we return, this morning, to the Creed at an especially critical juncture. You may recall that we had only gotten through the Creed’s very succinct opening paragraph: **I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.** At the time we noted, and it is worth repeating: this portion of the Creed is pretty much the one we share with observant Jews and Muslims although...to be fair...the word “Father” might cause them a wee bit of hesitation, since it hints at what is about to blossom with the Creeds’ second paragraph, the one that begins with a further expression of faith: faith in Jesus Christ who, in addition to a number of other definitions, will be spoken of as the “Son”. For faithful Jews and Muslims, that is a bridge too far...way too far.

You see, there is nothing remotely like this talk of Jesus Christ in either the Jewish or Islamic statements of faith. The Jewish Shema: **Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, The Lord is One** comprises but one sentence. The Islamic Shahada is scarcely longer: **There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.** And please! Recognize that the mention of the prophet Muhammad in the Islamic creed is nothing like the reference to Jesus Christ in the Christian Creed. Muhammad’s role is that of a messenger, a prophet, who in no way participates in the being of God. The role envisioned for Jesus within the Christian conception of God is radically different: a difference we’ll get to explore over the coming weeks. But for this morning....

...we’ll for this morning...we can do a whole lot worse than to start at the beginning: to be precise, the beginning marked by this festive Christmas season, a season in which we get to honour the new beginning staked out in and through the birth of Christ. And yes: a beginning well represented by the opening 17 verses of Matthew’s Gospel....which is to say...the opening 17 verses of the New Testament.

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Okay. To be entirely accurate...it should be noted that there are **some** Christian Bibles—generally found in the realm of Eastern Christianity—that begin not with Matthew's Gospel, but with John's. In many ways that makes perfect sense, given the opening verses of John's Gospel (with their powerful proclamation, *In the beginning was the Word!*) echo the opening verse of the Old Testament with its proclamation: *In the beginning God created!*" Nevertheless!

Nevertheless! The majority tradition, by a country mile, launches the New Testament with Matthew: in a way that ties the second Testament together with the first Testament in perhaps an even more profound way. How? By providing a genealogy for Jesus, tracing him right back to Abraham. While most of us, when we are reading the Bible, tend to skip over the genealogies, in truth:

...in truth: genealogies, enjoyable or not, are a crucial element in **both** testaments: seeking to anchor the Biblical story in the concrete history of God's people...and in the case of Matthew's genealogy, seeking to anchor the story of Jesus in that of his Jewish forebears. Matthew's genealogy serves as a reminder that Joseph and Mary were Jews, meaning that the babe to whom Mary gave birth was a very Jewish baby! Circumcised (as Luke's Gospel insists) on the 8th day according to the law of Moses! Dedicated in the Jerusalem Temple by devout parents! And given a classically Jewish name: Yeshua...or, as we would tend to know that name, Joshua! To begin at the very beginning of the Jesus Christ paragraph of the Apostle's Creed...

...the **central** paragraph of the Apostle's Creed...

...to unveil that paragraph and to do so at Christmas, is to be given the opportunity to reclaim that facet of our heritage. And yes: whatever else Matthew is doing by launching his Gospel with that genealogy, what he is most certainly doing is inviting **all** Christians—Jews and Gentiles alike—to claim that heritage for themselves.

Consider!

Consider that Matthew—in presenting that lengthy 42 generation long genealogy, traces the child's heritage through his father Joseph, only to reveal—in the very next episode—that Joseph is **not** biologically Jesus' father! Assuming that Matthew was not a moron—and he most definitely was not a moron—surely his point is that Joseph, in the very act of adopting Jesus as his own son, grafts Jesus into his own personal heritage. Is it not the case....is it not **also** the case....that Matthew's Gospel...

...a Gospel which begins with Father Abraham but which will end with the command of the risen Christ for the Apostles to make disciples of **all** nations...

...is it not clear that Matthew in his Gospel is inviting **all** of his readers (Gentile readers no less than Jewish readers) to see themselves as having been adopted into this classic Jewish story. All of which leads me to conclude: as we contemplate the cradle in which the babe is laid at Christmas, we ought not be surprised

to find in that cradle...the gift of a rich and weighty heritage: a heritage that links us to God's people, not only over the 2000 year history of the Church...but a heritage that stretches back much further: at least as far as God's called to Abraham and Sarah. With the birth of this babe to Joseph and Mary, that becomes our **shared** heritage. And yes: what a rich and weighty and complex heritage it turns out to be.

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In the time remaining to me, this morning, I want briefly to ponder three facets of that heritage: three facets of what it means for us to be part of a community that traces its heritage through the heritage of the child Jesus...the child who would have been known as Yeshua. In particular, I want to ponder it as a heritage that bequeaths to us a **book**, an **obsession** and a **hope**. Let's start with the book.

The **book** I have in mind, of course, is none other than what we Christians refer to as the Old Testament, a book which has proven, I think, to be both a blessing and a burden in the life of the church: a source not only of comfort and challenge but of unending controversy. Almost from the outset of the Christian movement, we have debated not only which version of the Old Testament ought to be the one used by the Church....

...should it be the Hebrew version used by Jews in Palestine or the longer Greek translation used by Jews in the Greek-speaking diaspora known as the Septuagint?...

...but even more basic as to **which** Old Testament to use, has been the question as to whether the Old Testament ought to have **any** place in the life of the Christian Church. Speaking personally: I am well aware—nearly 30 years into Pastoral Ministry—that Gentile Christians tend not to have the same instinctive affection for the Old Testament as I tend to have. That is hardly surprising given that the Old Testament—whatever else it may be—is the national literature of the Jewish people, playing a role in Jewish culture not unlike the role Homer and Hesiod play in Greek culture, the role Norse mythology plays in Scandinavian and Germanic culture, the role the Mahabharata and Ramayana play in Indian culture! Perhaps more importantly...

Given the sprawling nature of the Old Testament—a shockingly diverse collection of books gathered over a roughly 1000 year span, in contrast to the New Testament which was likely collected in less than 1/10th that time—it stands to reason that the mix of material found therein, **including its portrait of God**, includes elements that don't always rest easily within a church culture defined by the New Testament portraits of Jesus. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the first great Christian heretic—a man by the name of Marcion—proposed eliminating the Old Testament altogether from the life of the church. Nor, given the power of much of the Old Testament—as well as its undeniable importance for understanding Jesus—is it surprising (at the other extreme) that a razor-sharp **New** Testament scholar, namely my own New Testament professor Lloyd Gaston, argued that the Old Testament ought to be considered the true Bible of

the Christian people, with the New Testament playing a role for Christians not unlike the role the Talmud plays for Jews, namely as a commentary on the Old Testament.

It's complicated, isn't it! For me the bottom line is this. On the one hand, I believe the Lloyd—God bless him—was wrong; I believe that the New Testament is and always will be the core testament for the Church, with its direct witness to Jesus...to Yeshua. On the other hand, I believe that the Church would be greatly impoverished were it not nourished—and yes, challenged—by that very big and sprawling **book**, the scripture it found waiting for it in the cradle along with the baby Jesus. At any rate: that's the first key gift—**the Hebrew Scriptures**—that was waiting for the Church when it came upon the infant Christ. The second?

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Well: that's the gift I have already named as an **obsession**. Please don't be offended when I name it in that seemingly off-handed way; no slight is intended. But the bottom line—which will be especially familiar to those who have taken the time to read the Old Testament—is that the Church inherited an obsession with none other than God, **the Holy One**, when it received, through Christ, its adoption into the people of God. The God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush; the God who spoke with such passion through the words of the prophets; the God who was even willing to weigh in with a few well-chosen thoughts in the aftermath of Job's seemingly endless debate with his would-be comforters. And you know:

One of the things I think we tend to do when we are part of a particular religious tradition, is to presume that all religious traditions are pretty much like ours: perhaps with some of the names changed to protect the innocent! In truth, each major religion has its their own unique mix of elements including—in the case of Christianity—a heritage (shared with Judaism and Islam) that places God—the **one** God, the **only** God, the **Holy** God—at the absolute centre of the life of faith. That has huge implications....

...starting with the character of Jesus himself, who will seek to ground everything he says and does, on his zealous desire to do the will of God! But it also has huge implications for how we, in the aftermath of Jesus' life, have sought to ponder his identity and his place in the economy of God. You see: had Jesus—had Yeshua—burst upon the scene apart from his God-drenched Jewish background, there is no reason to imagine that he would not simply have been welcomed as a new god taking his place side by side with other gods. That explains why there are shrines in India that include icons of Jesus, alongside icons of some of the other gods: in a Hindu pantheon that some would number in the millions! My point is simply this! To the extent that the early Christians came to believe that they had somehow encountered God through this Jesus—more to the point, **that God through this Jesus had somehow encountered them**—their characteristically Jewish focus on the One God, the Holy God left them no choice but to do a whole lot of re-thinking: not only about who this Jesus was, but about who their God really and truly was since they knew in their bones that this Jesus, whoever he might have been, was most certainly not an additional god! So much for

the second gift found in that cradle: the characteristically Jewish **obsession** with the one true God.

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The third of those gifts, is one that I have named the gift of **hope**.

I am reminded, here, reminded of my favorite quote from the great Canadian literary critic, Northrop Frye, who made the point that the Old Testament provides us with history written from the perspective of the losers. I am also put in mind of a lovely sermon I read back in early December—during the first week of Advent—when the Episcopalian preacher Fleming Rutledge made the point that “Advent begins where human potential ends”. Advent begins...and I would suggest **the life of Christian faith begins**...where human potential ends! The Biblical story, you see—

...not only the Old Testament story with its heart-wrenching saga of Ancient Israel continually overrun by imperial forces from Africa, Asia and Europe, but also a New Testament that reaches its climax on the Cross...

...the Biblical story is not the story to which you turn if you want to convince yourself that the human future is going to be a bright and happy one, if we can just let human ingenuity and goodwill carry the day. It's not that the Bible—either Old or New Testament—wants to discourage human action. Given that the Old Testament includes over 600 commandments to be followed by ancient Israel—and that Jesus a few pages into Matthew's Gospel actually intensifies a handful of those commandments—suggests that **neither** book can be accused of encouraging human inaction. God forbid! But what the Testaments, Old and New alike, most certainly do encourage is a recognition that even our best efforts will always leave us far short of where we yearn to be...and that the journey from here to there is a journey that will only succeed in reaching its destination through God's in-breaking participation: God's in-breaking **participation** in the human story.

And, of course, of course: the very title by which this baby would come to be known—the title Messiah, the title Christ—embodies precisely that hope: the hope of the in-breaking God seeking to put right that which we, left to our own devices, would never be able to put right. And yet: if we read the Gospels carefully, we'll realize that title became associated with him only toward the end of his life, when one of his followers—a man named Simon Peter—responded to the question (*who do you say that I am?*) by speaking of him as Christ, as Messiah. But while that **title** may have come late, what cannot be doubted is that his parents, under strict angelic instruction, gave to this child a no less powerful **name**: Jesus, Yeshua, Joshua, a name that manages to embody in one word, the hope that was ancient Israel's hope, a hope that through Jesus, through Yeshua, is now our hope as well. And what, you may ask, is that hope? Yah saves! That's what the name Joshua means. Yah saves! God saves! The Holy One saves. And just as it was the role of the first Joshua to lead his people into their

Promised Land, so it is the role of the new Joshua—the One we call Jesus—to lead us to our true home. And yes: as you may rightly imagine!

All of that will need to be unpacked more fully...as we watch him grow into the fullness of his mission. And yet all of it—every ounce of it—can already be glimpsed...in and through this birth, this magical new beginning. A new Joshua in our midst! Come to save us! Come to set us free. Born in the night, this child of Mary's. Born in the night...and born in David's city...that dimly lit corner of Bethlehem in which Mary gave birth to her son. Bethlehem! The Bethlehem of which it can rightly and truly be said: "the hopes and fears of all the years....are met in thee tonight."

In the name of the Christ child—in the name of our Jesus, our Yeshua: may it be so! Thanks be to God!