

It was bold of the Gospel writer Matthew to begin today's passage by saying, "The birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way."

*(Mt 1:18)*

- After all, decades had passed before the story was written down
- How much do we know about the birth of any of our grandparents, or our parents for that matter?
- Sometimes there are exceptional circumstances, however, which make a birth story live on in the family legends
- Marsha's father, for example, was born in the Flint Hills of Kansas during tornado season
- With no early warning systems in those days, her granddad would sit out on the porch watching the sky, and if a twister was spotted, they'd go down into the root cellar

Marsha's grandmother was well into labor when a tornado appeared on the horizon, and despite the pleas of her family members, there was no way she was getting up out of that bed

- Apparently someone stayed with her and later reported watching the twister approach, jump over the house, then return to earth and continue on its way
- When everyone came out of the root cellar the path of destruction confirmed the story, and they made a mental note to watch how God might be working in Wilbur's life
- Maybe that's an image of what the birth of Jesus was like— it's clear that the story lived on in the memory of the community

Matthew takes great pains to present the narrative in a way that shows that the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises of the Hebrew scriptures

- First, his Gospel begins with "an account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." *(Mt 1:1)*
- The patriarchal line is carefully traced to Joseph, with barely a mention of the women who were involved

Second, Matthew weaves scriptural quotations into the story, showing that the birth is the fulfillment of prophecies by Isaiah, Micah, and Jeremiah

- His people would have know those passages well, so they served to authenticate the message

Finally, Joseph is shown to be guided by a series of dreams, which in their tradition were a means of revealing God's words and will

- For example, Jacob's dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder, and the night he spent wrestling with an angel to receive the name "Israel"
- Or his son Joseph, whose dream of ruling his eleven brothers angered them and got him sold into slavery in Egypt
- While imprisoned there he was called before Pharaoh to interpret dreams, and when he succeeded, Joseph became the chief administrator of the kingdom

Joseph in the Gospel story (and isn't the shared name interesting?) found himself in an awkward situation

- When his betrothal went on the rocks due to an expected pregnancy, we are told that "an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream" to direct him to stay with Mary
- The explanation is one that many people today struggle with: "the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit"
- The angel never tries to explain exactly how that happened—we can only assume that it's at the heart of the mystery of God taking flesh and being born as a tiny baby
- In any case, something about the dream visitation was so powerful and authentic for Joseph that he instantly obeyed, taking Mary as his wife and naming the baby Jesus
- Three succeeding dreams in the second chapter of the Gospel call Joseph to serve as the protector of mother and child, leading them away into Egypt to escape the wickedness of King Herod, then making a new home in Nazareth where the child will grow up

The puzzling thing about Matthew's genealogy is that it doesn't really work in the literal sense—it's a kind of "legal fiction"

- It's all well and good to trace the line from Abraham to Joseph, but Mary, the biological parent, has no part in it
- This call, which Joseph receives in such a compelling way that he obeys without question, is thoroughly unconventional in a patriarchal society

- With no direct part in the conception of Jesus, the story places him in a unique role: the stepfather and protector of a vulnerable infant and his mother
- This is precisely the reason why, out of all the narratives in the Bible, this story speaks to me and to my calling to be a father

We all know how much the makeup of families in America has changed in the last generation

- Fewer than half our children now grow up to age 18 living with both their biological parents
- Custody arrangements and gender expectations vary widely from family to family
- Generally mothers are custodial parents, but what about fathers?
- Some are equally involved in their children's lives, others pay child support and have regular visitations, but it's sad to say that a significant number of fathers have little contact with their kids

I met my daughter and son—Frieda and Cory—when they were 6 and 4 years old

- Shortly after I moved to a small town in northern California in the late 70's, Marsha and I were set up on a blind date
- You can guess that we hit it off right away, but after the second time we saw each other it became clear that the kids were part of the package
- I have wonderful memories of those early days: Frieda's seventh birthday party, in April in the garden—helping Cory learn to ride a bike—but none of us had any idea how things would develop
- We gradually drew closer to each other over a period of more than two years, until Marsha and I decided one day that we'd get married

Before the wedding date arrived, however, our town was battered by a terrible flood

- After weeks of steady rain, just after Christmas we got twelve inches in twenty-four hours
- Hillsides turned to mush and mud flowed everywhere—the tiny creek in Marsha's back yard raged across the valley, undermining trees which fell on the house

- Fortunately no one was injured, but along with others in the community they were instantly homeless, and roads in all directions were blocked by debris
- We stayed with friends for a couple of weeks, and because my little cabin was too small for the family, we found a house to rent together, where we ended up living for seven years

It wasn't so much that I was cast into the role of their protector—the reality is that single parents are under tremendous stress even when things are going well

- As soon as illness or financial problems or the loss of a home enter the picture, one parent, no matter how loving and faithful, may not be able to keep things together
- We found it hard enough with two adults, but with the disappearance of the biological father, a space opened up to make ourselves into a new family
- The wedding was a precious gathering of family and friends, with the kids taking their parts very seriously

As the years went by our personal bonds deepened through shared experiences:

- working in the garden, hiking and going to the beach, helping with homework and volunteering at school
- attending programs at the community center and potlucks at friends' houses, playing with our cats and raising a puppy
- and eventually, taking the kids to concerts, helping them get ready for their proms, and working together to build a house

Family rituals developed which gave us a sense of connection and security:

- Cooking and sharing meals, reading books out loud in the evenings (before we had a TV), decorating for the holidays
- We developed a comfortable pattern for Thanksgiving and Christmas: a trip to the beach in the morning (remember, this was California), cooking and eating a big meal in the afternoon, and playing board games in the evening
- We went on trips every summer all the state, camping and backpacking in the most spectacular places

- We made yearly visits to Marsha's parents in the desert, and occasionally made it back to Iowa to see mine
- On one trip we drove together through southern Colorado—that was the time our son fell in love with the Durango area, where he and his wife eventually moved
- On our twentieth wedding anniversary, Frieda and Cory wrote a touching account of their childhood memories—and now we've celebrated both of their weddings and the beginning of our time as grandparents

Reading today's Gospel story, it's interesting for me to consider the sense of call that led me into our family

- The heart of it has been my love for Marsha and our marriage, intertwined with the children who knew her first
- Looking back at my role as an everyday father, supporting the kids emotionally has played a big part, as they've dealt in their own ways with being abandoned by their birth father
- There has certainly been a practical side to all of this, for I was able to help Marsha start a landscape contracting business and work with her for twelve years
- But what stands out for me is how these family relationships have brought fulfillment to my life—being together has brought me the greatest joy I've known
- To me, the opportunity to grow into a family is a precious gift from God

As Marsha and I look back through these years, we remember muddling through, trying to do our best but never really having things in order, joys and struggles always mixed up together

- Do you suppose it was that way for Joseph and Mary?
- Despite the angel visitations and scriptural prophecies, raising Jesus and his siblings was probably quite a challenge
- But what a privilege to nurture and protect those children—and what a blessing to know God's presence in the process
- That's the promise of our faith: Emmanuel, God with us
- Who could ask for anything more?