

GOSPEL VOICES

Advent with Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John

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INTRODUCTION

Beginnings are important.

Many of the great first lines in literature echo through the ages because they set the tone for everything that is to follow. From Charles Dickens's "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," to Jane Austen's "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife," the start of the story can sweep us off our feet and propel us into a fantastical future before we are even fully aware of what's happening.

It makes sense then, that as Christians, we should pay attention to how the stories of the gospels start; they set the tone for everything that is to follow. From Matthew's "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" to John's "In the

beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” each of the four gospel writers offers a unique perspective on who Jesus is and how he changes our lives. Each gospel begins the narrative in a distinct way that helps us encounter Jesus anew. From Matthew’s careful lineage to Mark’s sense of urgency to Luke’s majestic *Magnificat* to John’s cosmic scope, we can learn something fresh about Jesus and about ourselves by paying attention to how the start of each story sets the tone for our life of faith.

This Advent, we invite you to “start at the very beginning; it’s a very good place to start.” This daily devotional spends a week with each of the four gospels, exploring how the writers tell the story of Jesus through their unique perspectives. The authors of *Gospel Voices* walk us through the gospel writer’s themes, how they start the story, favorite passages, and examples of how to live out the gospel. The devotions include collects from the Book of Common Prayer to help frame each section and a weekly opportunity for *Lectio Divina*, an ancient way of praying through scripture. You can read each day’s devotional on your own or as part of a small group study to help strengthen your faith in this holy season. And, of course, on various years, Christmas falls on different days in the fourth week of Advent, so we’ve included the full week and invite you to read through it as well.

Beginnings are important. And part of the great good news of God is that every year in Advent, each of us gets the gift of a new beginning, a fresh start. Whether you have done daily devotionals for years or this is your first one, whether you've read the Bible from cover to cover or you are opening a Bible for the first time, whether you are an expert in prayer or you are just starting out, this book, and this season, is for you.

I wonder what you will hear when you listen to the story this time?

I wonder how you will start the story of Jesus that you tell others?

Are you ready? Let's begin.

The Rev. Melody Wilson Shobe
Chief of Staff, Forward Movement

Sample

THE FIRST WEEK
OF ADVENT

Sample

Sample

MATTHEW



Hope in the Fulfillment of God's Covenant

This Week's Writer
TINA FRANCIS

Sample

SUNDAY

I do not know what brought you to this text today. Maybe you're procrastinating on a deadline. Maybe this is a last-ditch attempt to salvage a difficult year. Maybe you're desperate enough to stop scrolling and let the room get quiet for a second. All of these are ways of arriving. None of them disqualifies you. All of that is welcome.

Advent often comes when people are already full. Full of worry, of unfinished conversations, of days that do not quite add up. It is called a season of waiting, but not because waiting is virtuous. Sometimes waiting is all that's left. Advent does not bring easy answers in a tiny, color-coded folder. It plops down beside us, out of breath, and says, *Yes. This is heavy.*

The Gospel of Matthew was written for people living in that kind of moment. Matthew is a teacher trying to help a community that is grieving what has been lost and is uncertain about what remains. The world they trusted has shattered. Matthew knows this ground well. Jesus is gone. The disciples have scattered. Rome is more Rome-ish than usual. Everyone is asking the same urgent question: *What now? How do we live now?*

Matthew answers in an unexpected way. He begins with a genealogy... a list of names. Generally, that is the least compelling way to begin anything. But Matthew is saying that before we talk about Jesus, we must talk about where he comes from. History matters. What shaped us and bruised us matters. Before we talk about God-with-us, we need to name who “us” actually is.

“Us” turns out to be complicated, full of scoundrels and saints. And Matthew leaves the mess in. The ones who did real damage and didn’t get redacted. Complicated people. Generations marked by failure, violence, and grief. Matthew insists that God works through actual lives, not ideal ones. That is either deeply comforting or deeply inconvenient, once you realize that it includes you.

This conviction runs through everything Matthew writes. Strip away the church words, and you can hear questions that sound suspiciously familiar:

How do I honor my roots without being trapped by them?

How do I live rightly without becoming brittle or cruel?

How do we recognize God's presence not later, not elsewhere, but here?

What does it cost to follow Jesus when the price is felt in the body, in relationships, in ordinary decisions?

Matthew doesn't answer these questions with pithy catchphrases or spiritual platitudes. He gives us Jesus teaching. Sermons. Parables. Instructions meant to be tried, not admired. How to forgive without disappearing. How to handle money without letting it hollow you out. How to pray when words feel thin or dishonest.

Jesus teaches us how to live together when power is uneven, fear is loud, and love is misunderstood. That is to say, Jesus teaches us how to live most days of the week.

In Matthew, preparation for Christ is not about being spiritually shiny. It is about formation. Small, ordinary choices made again and again until mercy feels like muscle memory. Like instinct. Love that shows up quietly, without a press release. Habits, not heroics.

Discipleship is not a vibe. It is work. Awkward, inconvenient work. Here is the part nobody puts on a mug: faithfulness is inefficient. It interrupts you. It will wreck your schedule. It will ask you to choose love over convenience, again and again.

Matthew does not promise this will fix what is broken. What he gives us instead is something sturdy to hold onto. Emmanuel. God with us. With us in the half-baked, half-brave, half-built parts of our story. With us when progress is slow. With us when we take five steps backward for every two steps forward.

Maybe that is the invitation today. Not to feel ready. Just to notice. To choose one small, inconvenient act of faithfulness. And to stay.



Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

MONDAY

Matthew begins the way old women begin stories when the night is long and the lamps burn low: with a roll call of names. Names that start to click against one another like prayer beads sliding through a practiced hand. Matthew is not a man who hurries the holy. He takes his time, bead to bead, name to name, until what sounds ordinary begins to hum with something more. At first glance, the opening of Matthew's Gospel reads like the ancient world's phone book—a dry, bureaucratic list. Names blur. Begats pile up. The instinct is to skip ahead to angels and dreams and a baby. But Matthew insists we slow down. He starts here on purpose.

This list is not filler. It is defiant. It is a quiet refusal to erase the people whose blood and bone made room for the Messiah. Matthew knows whose names are usually left out. This is not a sanitized bloodline. It is a

real one, with complicated histories, their pasts rattling behind them.

This family tree is crooked. It leans. It has knots. It has branches snapped by storms and grafted back on. Kings who abused power. Men who failed spectacularly. Women who survived impossible situations with grit and holy defiance. Tamar. Rahab. Bathsheba. People whose stories are not neat, not polite, not easy to explain at dinner.

Matthew could have pruned the family tree for polite company. He does not. He leaves the mess in the story because the mess is how God comes—through real families. Through the fault lines of human history. Through stories that carry shame and possibility at the same time.

Jesus arrives bearing the weight of what came before him. Not protected from it. Not hovering above it. Fully entangled.

What does this tell us about Jesus? It tells us that he does not drop into history untouched. He does not arrive sealed off from grief or harm. He comes carrying it. All of it. The weight of what came before. The ache. The longing. The courage. The damage. He enters history fully, not to erase it, but to redeem it from the inside.

The genealogy is not a highlight reel. It is a family album—the kind with pages you might want to tear

out and throw away. But Matthew says: *Keep them*. All of them. God doesn't need perfection. God works with *what is*.

Jesus is shaped by women who had to make impossible choices. By outsiders who survived by their wits. By men who made terrible decisions and still became part of the story. He comes from people who were faithful sometimes and reckless at others. Brave and broken in the same breath.

Jesus is not God's escape plan from humanity. He is God's commitment to it.

That means your story is not in the way. Your family. Your history. The parts you wish were different. These are not obstacles. They are where God starts.

Jesus comes from imperfect people.

That is the point.

REFLECT

Think about your family tree. Who are the people you'd rather not claim? How do their stories—and the stories of all the people in your family history—shape you? What is the Gospel of Matthew saying to us through the purposeful beginning of a litany of genealogy?