

5. Seeing Nativity Through the Parables

As Christmas approaches and we prepare to celebrate the Nativity of our Lord, our *Journey Through the Parables* takes another little side trip. As we've studied Christ's parables, we have learned so much about the Kingdom of heaven and about our relationship with God. While Jesus doesn't tell any parables specifically about His own birth, perhaps we have learned some things that might give us a new insight into this great and wonderful feast. What if we were to think about Christmas this year by looking to see how the wisdom of the parables helps us understand this great feast?

All of the feasts of the Church might make us think of the parables about the great banquet feasts. On normal Sundays when we receive Holy Communion, that's a little preview of that great banquet in heaven, and the feasts or the holidays (which comes from, "holy days") are even more so -- they are a small taste of the great feast that awaits us in heaven. In *The Parable of the Marriage Feast*, we learned a lot about how God throws us this banquet, inviting everyone from the highways and the hedges, and how we should accept that invitation instead of being too busy managing our abundant blessings! We shouldn't be distracted by this wonderful world, but should always be available to God. Every feast in the liturgical year is an echo of that great marriage banquet in the Kingdom.

The Ten Virgins were waiting to go to that feast. We're getting ready for Christmas, like the five wise virgins were getting ready to receive the bridegroom. We're preparing ourselves to welcome baby Jesus at the Nativity, by fasting for forty days, praying more and giving more.

The Church also prepares us with the gospel readings we hear in liturgy on Sundays. In fact, you may have noticed that just before Christmas, we'll hear a really unusual Gospel reading. Instead of telling a story, this one is just a long list of names:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham:
Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers. Judah begot Perez and Zerah by Tamar, Perez begot Hezron, and Hezron begot Ram. Ram begot Amminadab, Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salmon. Salmon begot Boaz by Rahab, Boaz begot Obed by Ruth, Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David the king. David the king begot Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah...

(Matthew 1: 1-6)

...And so on! The list goes on and on, naming so many of the people we get to know in the Old Testament, from Abraham to King David to Ruth and all the way to Joseph, the husband of Mary. In his very first chapter, St. Matthew reminds us that Jesus comes from a big family tree; He isn't just appearing out of nowhere. There is a story about how He came to us.

Back at the very beginning, when God created Adam and Eve, they were happy in the Garden, in Paradise, with God. But the serpent spoke to Eve, deceiving and tricking her, and then she and Adam ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. Adam and Eve had to leave the Garden, and God cursed the serpent saying,

“Because you have done this, you are cursed more than all cattle, and more than all the wild animals of the earth. On your breast and belly you shall go, and you shall eat dust all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He shall bruise your head, and you shall be on guard for His heel.”

(Genesis 3: 14)

When God talks about the “Seed”, He is talking about Jesus. “He shall bruise [the serpent’s] head” is a promise God is making to Adam and Eve, to all of humanity. Adam and Eve separated themselves from God and allowed Death to enter the world, but God promises that He will send the *Seed* to conquer death. Christ will trample down death by death.

Jesus is not appearing out of nowhere. God made a promise in the Garden that He would send Jesus to vanquish death, and He kept making that promise again and again. In the parables we have been reading, we have seen God make a promise, haven’t we? In *The Parable of the Laborers and the Vineyard*, we learned that God is like a vineyard owner Who hired some people to work for Him, and promised to pay them one denarius. God made a promise, and He kept it. In fact, He hired a lot of people, but not all at once -- remember that He first hired people at the start of the day, and then some more people a little later, then some even later, and some really at the end of the day almost. But He promised them all the same pay: one denarius. And He kept His promise. Here we see that God makes a promise at the beginning; God has promised to send His *Seed*. Just like the parable, over time, He will slowly “hire” these people that we find in Jesus’ family tree.

St. Matthew’s family tree begins with Abraham; he is the one whose wife, Sarah, had never had a baby and eventually she was way too old to have a baby, but three angels came and said the couple would have a very special baby after all! God told Abraham, “In your seed shall all of the nations of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 12:3, 22:18). Abraham’s family line, which starts with this baby, and then that baby’s babies, and their babies, for generation after generation, will bring the *Seed* by whom all the nations of the earth are blessed: Jesus Christ! So Matthew says, “Abraham begot Isaac, and Isaac begot Jacob...” because God is promising that Abraham’s family line will bring us to Jesus.

As we go down the list, we see that Abraham’s son Isaac begot Jacob. You probably remember Jacob. He had twelve sons and gave his son Joseph the coat of many colors! Long before Jacob was a father, he was the younger brother of Esau, who was a big hairy hunter guy. Jacob loved to cook and there was a day when Esau came in from hunting and he was very hungry, and Jacob had just made some delicious soup. Esau traded his birthright for a bowl of soup! Isn’t that crazy? For just one bowl of soup, he traded all of his rights as the firstborn son. That birthright was God’s promise to send the *Seed* who would save the world through that family! So Jacob gets the birthright, and St. Matthew assures us that Jesus comes through his line!

St. Matthew lists the family line all the way to Jesus. You don't see a list like that very often nowadays, but back then, that wasn't such an unusual thing to put in a book. But actually, St. Matthew did do something unusual with his list: he included some women. Usually, those lists are only men, but we get to see some of the mothers listed too.

Here's an interesting thing: the woman named Tamar in Jesus' family tree was actually someone who tricked Judah into getting her pregnant with twin babies named Perez and Zerah. Her son, Perez, is part of the family line of Christ, so she is too! Perez isn't coming from a wonderful, upright family. His mom wasn't exactly a good person. She was tricky and dishonest, but there she is, in Jesus's family tree.

Two of the women in St. Matthew's list weren't even from God's people, the Israelites. The woman named Rahab in this long list is the one who helped Joshua's spies when they came to Jericho. She was good to the Israelites, and became an honored part of Jesus' family tree. Rahab's son Boaz would marry Ruth, and she was a Moabite woman who grew up worshipping false gods. She was so good and loyal, and she declared that she would worship only the one true God. So both Rahab and Ruth are in the family line of Jesus Christ, even though they both came from pagan peoples -- they were like converts today, but God used them to fulfill His promise and to send His *Seed*. They're right there, in Christ's family tree.

If you remember, we just recently were reading about a time when the Pharisees and scribes couldn't understand why Jesus, if He was so holy, would sit down with sinners and tax collectors. Why would He want to talk to anyone who was not following God's laws and always doing the right thing? Jesus answered with *The Parable of the Lost Sheep*, of course, telling them about the shepherd who lost one of his sheep. We learned that every single sheep is precious to Him, so the shepherd will go anywhere to find a lost sheep and bring it home. We have to ears to hear that Jesus loves all of the people, even the ones who have wandered off and gotten lost in sin. He will go to any lengths to find us and bring us home, to Paradise.

Jesus' family line shows us this same message we heard in that parable: every person is precious, whether they are men or women, whether they are born to God's chosen people or to strange, pagan cultures, and even whether they have kept God's law carefully or whether they have been sinners. He loves each and every one of us, and His own family line includes all of us.

We can also see how *The Parable of the Laborers and the Vineyard* gives us a special insight into the long line of prophets who came before Christ. God made a promise, like that vineyard owner, and He made it at different times. He promised the first people that He would send His Seed; then He promised the next people that He would send His Seed; and then He promised the next people and the next. With every generation, He repeated His promise to send His Son to trample down death by death. Just as the vineyard owner brought in a new group of workers every few hours, always promising the same denarius as pay, God has promised to send His Son to save humanity, generation after generation. When we receive our Lord and Savior, we won't get any more than anyone who comes after us: we will all receive the perfect fulfillment of God's promise.

Another of the parables we've read can help us see the deep truth behind the way that God fulfills His promise, the specific way that Jesus arrives here on earth. *The Parable of the Mustard Seed* is about how the Kingdom of Heaven is like a tiny little seed that will grow and grow into something large and amazing, giving a home to many birds. And when God sends His Son to us, even though Jesus is actually God, He will show up as just a tiny baby wrapped up in blankets -- just like you and I were when we were born! God is all-powerful, He is everywhere present -- He is so huge and mighty, and yet, He came to us as a tiny baby. Like the mustard seed, He seemed tiny and unimportant, but He would reveal Himself to be the *Seed* come to save us, the King of Kings, the very Son of God. Both of these seeds turn out to be a lot bigger than you would think! This tiny baby will turn out to be the Savior of all the nations, something so unimaginably big! But He will start out tiny, like the little mustard seed.

Finally, we have noticed in these parables that the Kingdom is always growing and God is always blessing us -- but we see that we have to put in effort, to do some work. The people keep turning out to be farmhands or vineyard workers or servants to the King. We have to work! We saw in *The Parable of the Talents* that God gives each of us a different blessing, and we have to be like the servants who take those blessings and make even more blessings -- not like the bad servant, who buried his talent in the earth, and never turned it into even more blessings! We mustn't sit around, lazy like the foolish virgins who slept instead of getting oil. Can you see anyone doing work in the story of Christ's birth? Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem and find a place to settle in, of course, but that's not the end of the work to be done. In the gospel of St. Luke, when the angels came tell the shepherds that Christ is born, we read,

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.

Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

(Luke 2: 15-20)

The shepherds did not just receive the angels' message and sit around. They didn't take naps like the five foolish virgins! Even there in the middle of the night, those shepherds got up and "came with haste" to find that baby in a manger. That means they were hurrying; they were making a lot of effort to get there fast. And they found Him! There He was, in the manger, just like the angels had said.

After seeing Christ in the manger, the shepherds were not finished working. They went on to tell everyone what the angels said. They spread the message that had been delivered to them, that Christ is born! That's the message you and I deliver on Christmas too! We will say to one another, *Christ is born! Glorify Him!*

In our *Journey Through the Parables* we have seen that we are expected to do some work, to make an effort. What efforts shall we make? Well, we'll prepare ourselves like the wise virgins, filling our lamps by fasting and praying and giving generous alms. And we'll be hardworking servants who, like the merchant who looks for the pearl of great price, and like those shepherds in the night, go looking for Christ! We can receive the news of Christ's birth and then multiply that blessing by spreading the good news; we can declare His birth and His presence here among us on earth, with our words and with our actions! For God is good, and He keeps His promises, and He sends salvation to every single one of us equally.

May the joy of the Nativity be with all of you! Christ is born! Glorify Him!

QUESTIONS:

Today we have looked at the Nativity through the lens of the Parables we have been studying. Here's a question about one of them: how does the Parable of the Ten Virgins help us think about the Nativity Fast? How are they similar?

- *We're waiting for Christmas, getting ready for it, like the five wise virgins were getting ready to receive the bridegroom. We're preparing ourselves to welcome baby Jesus at the Nativity, by fasting for forty days, praying more and giving more.*

What does the parable of the Mustard Seed help us to understand about the Nativity of Our Lord?

- *Our Lord Jesus was born as a small helpless baby, just as a mustard plant begins as a tiny seed. But He is God, and He would reveal Himself to be the Seed come to save us, the King of Kings, the very Son of God. This tiny baby will turn out to be the Savior of all the nations, something so unimaginably big!*

Think back over the parables that we have been studying. Which one has helped you learn the most about the Nativity this year? Did you have any "aha" moments as we talked about them today, any connections that you hadn't thought about before?

- *There are many, many answers to this question! We hope that at least one of the parables we've studied so far has helped you learn more about Christ and how/why He came to earth. For example, Jesus' family line and the parable of the Lost Sheep show us the same thing. I really like how even in Jesus' family line, God shows us that every person is precious, whether they are men or women, whether they are born to God's chosen people or to strange, pagan cultures, and even whether they have kept God's law carefully or whether they have been sinners. He loves each of us. Glory to God!*

FOR DISCUSSION:

As we're studying the parables, we are learning that we are expected to do some work, to make an effort. Today we have learned that it's the same as we prepare for the Nativity of Our Lord! We can't just sit here counting the days until Christmas: we need to prepare ourselves like the wise virgins. Think about your Nativity Fast: are you filling your lamp by fasting and praying and giving generous alms? What else can you do? Are you looking forward to Christ's birth like the merchant looked hard for the pearl of great price or like the shepherds who went in the night to look for Christ? Talk about that. On Christmas, how will you declare His birth and His presence here among us on earth? What words will you say, and what will you do to help others to know that He is born?