

**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent 4 (A)**  
**Matthew 1:18-25**  
*God's googly*

Matthew's account of Jesus' birth is often described as being seen through Joseph's eyes, while Luke focuses on Mary. There's truth in that, but it's not the whole picture. Matthew wants us to see the story through Joseph, yes – but also through the long, surprising history that leads to him.

Before the Gospel passage we've just heard, Matthew opens with a genealogy – a long family tree stretching across forty-plus generations. Many people love digging into their ancestry, often discovering unexpected characters along the way. In mine, for instance, there's Barry Crump, early settlers who landed at Petone, a bigamist, and a clan of Jacobite Scots. But my family line doesn't end with a surprise quite like Matthew's.

At first glance, Matthew's list of "begats" may appear rather dull – names upon names, stretching down the centuries. But look more closely and you discover remarkable twists. Several women appear in this genealogy – highly unusual in a Jewish lineage. And they're not the women we might expect. They include two prostitutes, two foreigners, and one adulteress. Matthew is showing us that God's story always moves through unexpected people and surprising circumstances.

And then comes his biggest twist. The list begins with Abraham and ends –so we assume – with Joseph, the husband of Mary. But just when we think we know where the story is heading, Matthew bowls a googly – that's a cricket delivery that veers the other way at the last moment, just when you think you've read its direction.

Joseph, Matthew tells us, isn't actually the father of Jesus. The story turns in a way no one could have predicted. Yes, this is Joseph's story – but it's also far bigger than him.

One night, while Joseph sleeps – his guard down, his control surrendered –an angel appears in a dream: "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." It's a staggering message. Angels don't appear every day, and this message upends every expectation Joseph had.

Here's the first great dynamic of the story: the birth of Jesus is utterly out of the ordinary. It defies explanation. We like things to make sense. We like things to be reasonable. We want explanations. That's why people try to explain Jesus' conception in biological terms. But Matthew doesn't want us to explain it away – he wants us to be astonished. Like Joseph, we're invited not to analyse but to stand in awe.

Christmas is God working outside the square. The genealogy's googly signals that God is doing something entirely new, and this newness is the work of the Spirit.

The Spirit of God is always stirring things up. At creation, the Spirit hovered over the deep, bringing life from chaos. At the end of all things, the Spirit will renew the world. And now, when humanity's imagination feels thin, when hope is a fragile thread, when the world is weary – the Spirit acts again, bringing forth a child who will change everything.

A second dynamic emerges in the angel's words, and that is, names matter. In Scripture, names aren't chosen because they sound nice; they speak of identity and calling.

Joseph is given two names for the child, and both are rich with meaning. First: *Jesus* – which means *Saviour*. “You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” Imagine a baby named “Save.” That’s what Jesus comes to do – to free us from guilt and despair, from fear and hopelessness, from brokenness and estrangement.

Advent is about preparing to receive the One who saves when we cannot save ourselves.

The second name is *Emmanuel* – *God with us*. In Jesus, God is present in the world in a new and transforming way. Wherever Jesus goes, things change. The blind see, the lame walk, the hungry are fed, the outcast welcomed. Even the dead rise. His presence makes new life possible.

This is the heart of the church’s faith: that God transforms – that the Spirit is constantly making things new. We are meant to be a people of wonder, alert to God’s surprising work in the world. Matthew’s Gospel insists that God works beyond our expectations, bringing hope where there’s despair, reconciliation where there’s estrangement, light where there’s darkness, life where there’s death.

So here we are – nearing Christmas.

Matthew prepares us not with a soft, sentimental scene, but with an angelic interruption in the night – a message that defies expectation. Yes, it was given to Joseph, but it is also given to us.

The child named *Jesus* rescues us from everything that blocks our capacity to love and be loved.

The child named *Emmanuel* assures us that we are never alone – not in life, not in death, not beyond death.

God is with us, and God is active – often in ways that startle us.

So, as this Advent draws to its close, we’re invited to wonder, to ponder, to live with expectation. Our world – global or personal – may sometimes feel unsalvageable. But Christmas announces that we are not abandoned. *God is with us*. And when human possibilities are exhausted, God offers new and surprising paths forward.

Perhaps this coming year, we can dare to live with expectation – trusting that God still surprises that God still creates, that God still renews, and that God still bowls a few googlies.

God of surprises,  
you come to us in ways we don’t expect,  
bringing hope where there is despair,  
light where there is darkness,  
and life where there is death.  
As we prepare to celebrate the birth of your Son,  
open our hearts to wonder and awe.  
Help us to trust your Spirit at work in the world and in us,  
so that we may live with courage, joy, and expectation,  
through Jesus Christ, Emmanuel – God with us.

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*Preached at Waiapu Cathedral – 21.12.2025*