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Sermon 17 October 2021

Title: Meet the Gospels 2 (Matthew)

- Good morning LargsNaz—it's so good to have you with us—and we certainly hope that you have been blessed this morning and that you have been made aware of God's presence with you right where you are today.
- This is the second Sunday in our "Meet the Gospels" series—and we have been talking about the "good news," the *euangelion*—the glad tidings, the "gospel" that is proclaimed by these four works that we call "gospels." So the "gospel," is both what these works ARE, what we call them, a genre or a type of writing that, as we learned last week is sort of like a biography, a life story, but on the other hand it is much more than just a biography because what a gospel presents us with is not just information about the life of Jesus, things he said and did, places he went and people he interacted with, but it also proclaims THE gospel, the good news that the Messiah has come, that the Kingdom of God has drawn near, the good news that this person, Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and taught and healed and fed people and performed deeds of power and authority, and who was crucified and rose again from the dead—this man was and is the Saviour of the world, the Christ, the Messiah that the people of God had been awaiting.
- And each of these four gospels make that point, proclaim that good news, that gospel, in a slightly different way—with different styles and different

objectives—they accomplish different things through the way that they present the gospel

- Last week we saw how the gospel of Mark is an urgent, apocalyptic gospel. That, I think, is a good way to remember how Mark's gospel is written—it is urgent because it tells its story with a sense of urgency, a sense that time is of the essence—it doesn't take the time to give us the backstory about Jesus birth or childhood or his genealogy or to tell us much about the resurrection and what happens afterward, and it jumps quickly from one scene to another because it has big, world-changing news to tell—and that news is apocalyptic—it has to do with the end of the world as it was before because the Messiah has been revealed—that's what's apocalypse means—revealing or unveiling—and Mark's urgent, apocalyptic gospel doesn't just tell us who the Messiah is, but tells us that the Messiah, the Son of God was crucified and raised from the dead—and Mark doesn't take too much time to explain what that means because his audience knows what that means—if the Messiah has arrived and if the dead are being raised then the Day of Resurrection is here, the Kingdom of God is arriving—and that's exciting, and scary—and apocalyptic and urgent.
- But today we're going to look at a second synoptic gospel—the synoptic gospels are called that because they see things similarly or because they can be viewed together—syn-optic—they tell the story of Jesus life similarly—the timeline and the events are similar in Matthew, Mark and Luke—but they are not exactly alike, and one of the ways they differ is in the way that they tell that story—the style and the details and the language they use—and while we can say that the

gospel of Mark is an urgent, apocalyptic gospel, I want to suggest that the gospel of Matthew is a prophetic, Hebraic gospel—a prophetic, Hebraic gospel. And by the time we're done today you'll see what I mean by that, but first, let's consider the context of the gospel of Matthew—you'll remember that, as we said last week, we're going to be looking at the context, the content, and a key passage for each of the gospels we're discussing each Sunday.

- What we mean by the context is considering questions like “how was it written and by whom and when and how has the gospel been used in the history of the church?”
- Scholars think that the gospel of Matthew was written sometime in the last 25 or 50 years of the first century—some of them think that there's a historical reference to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in chapter 22, and that happened in the year 70, so they think it had to have been written after that, but others don't think that Matthew is talking about that historical event, and so might have been written earlier in the first century.
- Now unlike the gospel of Mark, which we saw last week was often underappreciated and critiqued during the past couple of thousand years of church history, the gospel of Matthew has always been viewed as very important, particularly by the early church-- even as the most important among the gospels, certainly among the synoptics, and so it comes first in the New Testament in the canon, in the collection of books in the Bible—it has been recognized as authoritative since at least the 2nd century.

- Now part of the reason that Matthew comes first in the lineup is that Matthew makes such a clear connection to the Old Testament—to Hebrew scriptures—this is why I suggested that Matthew is a Hebraic gospel and we'll talk more about that when we discuss the content—but another reason that Matthew was viewed as the most important gospel in the early church was that it provides a clear timeline from Jesus birth to after the resurrection and so it was used to educate new Christians about Jesus' life, and it also contains very clearly 5 sections, or 5 narratives and discourses of Jesus that make it quite easy to understand and clear—and some scholars think that Matthew did this in order to parallel the 5 Books of Moses, the Pentateuch—again, another connection to the Hebrew scriptures—but another reason it was so highly thought of was that it was thought to have been written by an actual disciple of Jesus, the tax collector Matthew, who the gospel of Mark calls “Levi.”
- Now a lot of things have changed in the world in the last 2000 years, but one thing that has remained unchanged is the reputation that tax collectors have—they are not particularly liked, let's just say—George Harrison, when he was a member of the Beatles certainly wasn't too fond of them, and that's why he wrote the song “Tax Man” that you may be familiar with—but the tax man, Matthew, was thought to have been the author of this gospel, even though the gospel itself doesn't tell us who wrote it, but the early church attributed it to Matthew, and because Matthew was an actual disciple with firsthand experience as a follower of Jesus, his gospel was thought of more highly than the other 2

synoptics which were understood not to have been written by disciples of Jesus but by a follower of Peter, that was Mark, and a follower of Paul, which was Luke.

- By the way, Matthew's gospel mentions money more times and in greater detail than any other gospel, which makes sense if it were written by a tax collector
- Now you don't have to believe that Jesus' disciple, Matthew, wrote the gospel of Matthew in order to be a Christian, and you don't necessarily need to believe that he didn't, either, but I would be remiss if we went through a series on the gospels and I didn't tell you about what scholars call the 4-source hypothesis. And the 4-source hypothesis is a way of thinking about the sources, or the origins, of what we find in the synoptic gospels, specifically in Matthew and Luke.
- And as we mentioned last week, most biblical scholars think that the gospel of Mark was the first gospel to be written, and that both Matthew and Luke were able to refer to it when they were writing their gospels—again, you may be of the opinion that Matthew was written first, and that's ok too, but the reason they think that Mark was first and was available to Matthew and Luke is because almost everything that's in Mark's gospel, from Jesus' baptism all the way to the empty tomb, is also in the other 2 synoptics—in fact Matthew's gospel contains 600 of Mark's 661 verses—so almost all of it—and so scholars think that Mark's gospel was a source of what got put into Matthew and Luke—but there is other content that's in both Matthew and Luke that ISN'T in Mark's gospel
- And so scholars think that came from a source called Q—that's the first letter of the German word for source—and scholars think that Q was a collection of the

sayings of Jesus—Q is hypothetical but other such collections of Jesus' sayings and teachings have been found, so they suppose that there was one that Matthew and Luke were able to refer to. So that's 2 sources of material, Q and Mark, that went into the other 2 synoptic gospels.

- However, there is some material, some content, that is in Matthew exclusively, and there is some content that is in Luke exclusively, and so it's supposed that there are 2 other sources, called M for Matthew and L for Luke—and it's important to note that Matthew's M source doesn't necessarily have to be a written source—it could have been his own firsthand experience as a disciple of Jesus. So that's the 4-source hypothesis—my feeling is that the truth about how these gospels got written is probably more complicated than this, but this is a good way of understanding how the synoptics are “synoptic”—how they share material but how each one also has material that unique to that gospel—in Matthew, that makes up about 20% of its content, and includes things like the journey of the Magi and the slaughter of the innocents when Herod ordered all the infant boys to be killed, and Mary and Joseph's flight to Egypt—again, you hear an awful lot of connection to the Hebrew scriptures in Matthew, in fact, Matthew quotes the Old Testament more than any other gospel writer.
- So I know that last week I suggested that no commentary was written on the gospel of Mark until the 6th century—and that's true if you only include works that interpret the scriptures and are called “commentaries,” but if you consider that what Matthew does is to interpret Mark's gospel and add his own

commentary, then you could say that Matthew is the first commentary on the gospel of Mark, the first interpretation of Mark's gospel.

- And that brings us to the content of Matthew's gospel. And this is of course not going to be an exhaustive look at all the material in this gospel, but I do want to give you some idea about what makes Matthew's gospel unique, and why I think that it's helpful to think of this gospel as a "prophetic, Hebraic gospel."
- And I want to just make clear what I mean by those two terms—let's start with the latter one first—Matthew can be understood as a Hebraic gospel because, as we've mentioned, Matthew mentions the Hebrew scriptures more than any other gospel, and as we look at Matthew's work as a whole, one of the most important things that Matthew does is to take the Hebrew tradition that Mark draws from but doesn't always make explicit, he takes the tradition that Mark mentions and in which Jesus is placed, and makes it explicit—that is, Matthew takes what Mark has mentioned or implied about Jesus' relationship with Jewish tradition and makes it abundantly clear—what Matthew does in his gospel is to more fully explicate the truth that Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified and resurrected Messiah, has indeed ushered in something new, that he has indeed changed the way the world works, BUT, Matthew wants us also to know that Christianity is not some completely new religion, but that it is the fulfillment of God's promises and God's work through the people of Israel and the fulfillment of what has been written in the Hebrew scriptures.
- Some scholars think that Matthew's gospel is a response to the fact that in the first century Christianity was growing in Gentile circles among folks who were

not as aware of the history and traditions of the Jewish people—and that certainly makes sense to me—but Matthew’s gospel is not only a Hebraic gospel, it not only makes the point that Jesus was a Jew and that what God had been doing throughout Israel’s history was leading toward the arrival of Jesus—Matthew’s gospel is also a prophetic gospel. Now if you’ll remember what a prophet in the Hebrew tradition does, a prophet is one who proclaims the message of God, particularly when His people have forgotten about it, when they have lost their way—and a prophet calls for repentance and promises God’s blessing or warns of God’s wrath. And I want to suggest that Matthew’s gospel is a prophetic gospel because Jesus is particularly prophetic in Matthew’s gospel—he proclaims the good news and calls for repentance—and Jesus’ prophetic voice is particularly aimed at those who claim to be the most religious, the most righteous—at those leaders of the church, namely the scribes and Pharisees and the chief priests and elders who are portrayed by Matthew as in cahoots with the political authorities, and who are more interested in power and control and keeping themselves separated from those who are unclean and unworthy and letting folks know how holy and law-abiding they themselves are—and Matthew shows us that those leaders are not helping other folks into the Kingdom because they do not set an example—they just pay lip-service to God’s law. If you want to see how prophetic Jesus can get toward the scribes and Pharisees, just read chapter 23 of Matthew’s gospel—that’s where Jesus says things like this, in verse 13: 13 ‘But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when

others are going in, you stop them. 15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.—Jesus said that--

- Jesus isn't playing, now,
- And so there is a kind of tension in Matthew's gospel—on the one hand Matthew refers to the Hebrew scriptures and Hebrew history and tradition to help us understand who Jesus is and what God has been doing through his people—that's the Hebraic gospel part—but on the other hand there is a critique, a rebuke and a condemnation of the way that some of the leaders of the Hebrew religion have aligned themselves not with God's authority, but with earthly authorities—and are seeking not God's approval, but the approval of people—Matthew is demonstrating the way that the church as an institution can become corrupt—and a tax collector would certainly know a thing or two about corruption.
- As you read through Matthew's gospel, keep these two themes in mind and see if you don't agree that they are a pretty good way of thinking about what makes Matthew's gospel unique. And what I'd like to do now is just mention a couple of places where these themes really show up—there are many, many other places—in every verse, really, where this pattern of pointing to the authority of Hebrew tradition and God's activity in and through the people of Israel on the one hand, and on the other hand saying that God is not confined to a religious institution or man-made traditions—that is the scribes and Pharisees don't have

God in a box and God's Kingdom will be built even if religious leaders try to stand in its way.

- One of the clearest examples of what Matthew is doing in his gospel is the way that he begins it—FIRST VERSE--the genealogy of Jesus, the son of David, the son of Abraham—and then he details that genealogy from Abraham to David to Jesus—for 17 verses!—there is the point Matthew is making in a nutshell—we can go all the way back to the Father of Israel—Abraham himself, and follow the activities and promises of God all the way through 14 generations of patriarchs, and another 14 generations, and another 14 generations, to Joseph, the husband of Mary. Jesus could not be more Davidic, more Hebraic, than this—but hang on—immediately after he has used all of this Hebraic tradition to establish Jesus as the authoritative Messiah, Matthew tells us that Jesus is not just the son of David, the son of Abraham, but that He is also outside that lineage because Joseph was not his biological father, God was. And so immediately we see that God's activity is in and through Hebrew patriarchal tradition but also outside of it, and not dependent on it—and we also see the way that Joseph reacts to Mary's pregnancy—not like a Pharisee with sanctimonious judgement nor with condemnation—he doesn't call for her execution as some religious folks might do—he plans to dismiss her quietly and not to bring disgrace upon her—but an angel of the Lord lets him know that God is working in their ordinary, everyday lives—there is more going on here than meets the eye
- and then in verse 22, Matthew tells us for the first time, “all this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet,”—and this is the

first of some ten times that Matthew will use those words to tell us specifically that what happened in the life of Jesus was to fulfill what had been said by a prophet of God—because Matthew’s is a prophetic gospel—incidentally, Matthew lets us know that prophecy has been fulfilled another dozen or so times even without those words.

- What happens next of course is that Matthew tells us how King Herod hears about Jesus birth from some kings outside of the Hebrew tradition, and so he enlists the help of the chief priest and scribes inside the Hebrew tradition and sets out to kill all the infant sons just like happened in the story of Moses, but Mary and Joseph escape to Egypt—of course Egypt, and when they return Matthew tells us again that “this was to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet”.
- And already in just the first 1 and a half chapters, we’ve seen how Jesus’ life fulfills Hebrew scripture and the words of the prophets, and we’ve seen how God is not bound to work inside places of power--religious institutions or manmade traditions, and we see how the religious leaders and political authorities can and do work together to try to thwart what God is doing in history—but also how those efforts don’t succeed-- God’s Kingdom, God’s work, won’t be stopped—and that is the pattern for the rest of the gospel—Matthew’s prophetic, Hebraic gospel.
- The key passage for today comes not from Chapter 1, but from Matthew chapter 5—from the Sermon on the Mount—perhaps the most important, most succinct summary of the teachings of Jesus that you will find anywhere in the Bible—it

starts there in chapter 5 and goes on to the end of Chapter 7—Matthew lets us know it's over in the same way that he ends each of the five discourses in his gospel, by telling us that Jesus had finished speaking, and at the end of this first discourse Matthew gives us a little of the kind of prophetic critique of the religious leaders that we've been talking about—that's in verse 28 and 29 of Chapter 7, where Matthew writes: 28 Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, 29 for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

- And what Jesus has taught with authority in these couple of chapters that make up the sermon on the mount is a way of living, an ethic, part of which is contained in what are called sometimes the antitheses in chapter 5—that's when Jesus says “you have heard it said do this or don't do this, BUT I say to you this other thing
- “you've heard it said ‘do not murder,’ or you'll be liable to judgement—but I say if you're angry with someone you're liable to judgment, and if you insult someone, or if you call someone a fool, you'll be liable to the hell of fire; Jesus works his way through several of these antitheses until winding up at the end of chapter 5 at “you have heard it said love your neighbour and hate your enemies, but I say love your enemies—pray for those who persecute you— Do more than the tax collectors—more than the Gentiles
- Jesus has used this “do more than” language at the beginning of chapter 5 as well—you heard it in what Pastor Tasha read—in verse 20 Jesus tells those

listening to him that "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"

- Unless your righteousness exceeds the scribes and Pharisees—those who are considered, and who certainly consider themselves, the most righteous--those who put themselves forward as experts in the law, professional religious leaders, those who try their hardest every day to live up to the letter of the law and point out the shortcomings of others who fail to meet their standards—Jesus tells this group of ordinary, everyday people that unless their righteousness EXCEEDS that of those in authority, those scribes and Pharisees, they'll never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.
- Now on the one hand this statement is a prophetic indictment of the so-called righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees—because their righteousness is self-righteousness, it is lip-service, it is an exercise in self-glorification and corruption that seeks the accolades of the powerful—but on the other hand this means that God can and does work outside of those in institutional authority, God works in and through in the lives of everyday people—even through those who are outsiders, those who are deemed unworthy and unclean—a carpenter, a pregnant unwed teenager, a tax collector, a bunch of fishermen, even a condemned and crucified Nazarene
- And God is at work whether the powers-that-be, the so-called religious elite are on board or not—because God has never stopped working throughout the history of his people, He has always been offering up opportunities for redemption, and Jesus' arrival is the culmination of that work—and so Matthew

tells us that Jesus commissions his followers--ordinary, everyday people, to go into all the world and make disciples—because the scribes and the Pharisees are not doing that

- Now when Jesus says “you have heard it said,” BUT I say,” you might think that Jesus is contradicting what has come before, that he is suggesting something new and different from the righteousness and the Law of God that the prophets before Him proclaimed—and that’s why Jesus tells us in verse 17: Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.
- What we witness in Matthew’s gospel is not the end of the Hebrew tradition, nor is it the beginning of God’s work for His people, it is not a change in the trajectory of the movement of God’s kingdom, it is not the abolition of the Law and the prophets, but the fulfillment of the promises that God has made to His people all the way back to the promise He made to Abraham—and that is good news—that is the gospel
- It was the Church of the Nazarene’s birthday this week—it’s been 113 years since that meeting where the merger of the Holiness Church of Christ with the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene was completed in Pilot Point, Texas, USA.
- But the church is older than that—it’s older than the Anglican tradition in which Wesley served, older than the Protestant tradition or the Catholic tradition, it’s older than the first century, because God has been working in the lives of His people since the very beginning, and as Christians our history is part of God’s

salvation-history, His mighty acts of steadfast love toward those He has called—
Matthew's prophetic, Hebraic gospel reminds us of that this morning

- Matthew's gospel also reminds us that God's work will not be hindered, God's Kingdom will not be stopped, even when those in authority, political or even religious leaders, become obstacles and try to slow down or stop what God is going to do—because God works outside of the power structures of this world, through ordinary people, people who day after day follow the example that Jesus gave us, ordinary everyday people who heed the prophetic call to take up our crosses and follow Him, who are commissioned to go and make disciples—everyday people who are called to a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees.