

## FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION SERMON SERIES

Climbing the Family Tree – Matt. 1:1-17

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There are a lot of great things about Matthew's gospel, but an attention-grabbing opening is not one of them. Really, Matthew a genealogy? That's like starting a Harry Potter book with a detailed recipe for butter beer or "To Kill a Mockingbird" with a recipe for...mockingbird? I don't know, but I do know that a genealogy is one of the least interesting ways to start what became the first chapter of the second half of the best-selling book in the history of the world.

Couldn't Matthew have paid attention to the other writers? Mark starts with the line, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ" then launches full-speed into the baptism of Jesus. John starts with a vaguely mysterious proclamation: "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." That's like the Bible's version of, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." And the only other gospel with a birth narrative, Luke starts with an explanation of why he's writing what he's writing, to give an orderly account of Jesus' life. And Matthew...starts with a bunch of "begats."

To us, this may seem like the most boring way to start what turns out to be a thrilling story, but to the original readers of Matthew, this would have made complete sense. Back then, genealogies weren't just a list of weird-sounding names. They were records of a person's ancestral history, linking them back to the all the people who made their lives possible. It was like looking through a family photo album, or what pastor Fred Craddock called "walking through Jesus' family graveyard." A genealogy told a story of belonging to a tribe, it rooted a person in those who came before them.

I remember as a kid walking from my grandma's house to the local barbershop for a haircut. The barber, Mr. Wolpert, had cut hair in that community for decades and knew just about everyone. When I walked in, he welcomed me, sized me up, and said, "Say, you're Tom's boy, aren't you? Isn't John Wilcoxson your granddaddy?" In that moment, Mr. Wolpert connected me to those who had come before me, linking me to others who'd sat in the same chair getting their haircut. We are rooted in those who have come before us.

That's what Matthew does with his genealogy. He links Jesus back to those who had come before him, tying him to some of the most important figures in Jewish history. He starts with the granddaddy of them all, Abraham. This would have been supremely important to Matthew's audience, who were primarily Jewish. Abraham was their spiritual forefather, so for Jesus to be a direct descendant would have carried some weight. But what would carry even more weight was that Jesus' lineage was also traced through King David, considered to be the greatest king in Israel's history. The prophecies in the First Testament promised that the Messiah would come from the line of David to re-establish David's kingdom in Jerusalem. In effect, Matthew's genealogy is saying that Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy, that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah.

It's important to note that symbolism of what Matthew has done here. This list of names is not meant to be historically accurate. As Matthew says, there are fourteen generations between Abraham and David, fourteen generations between David and the exile, and fourteen generations from the exile to Jesus. Why fourteen? Well, the number for perfection in the Bible is seven, like the seven days of creation. So, to double seven is to say that God's perfection is made even more manifest in this historical accounting of Jesus' family tree. The symmetry is divine, from the

initial blessing God gave to Abraham to the high point of David's reign to the low point of the exile to the new blessing given through the Messiah. From Abraham to David to the exile to Jesus.

But there are a lot of other names in there, many of them lesser-known. Some of them were kings, some of them were heroes, but most of them we know very little about. For every Abraham and David there's Aminadab and Zadok, literally covering the breadth of God's people from A to Z. And yet, those aren't the most interesting names in this genealogy. There are actually four people who don't belong, not because they weren't Jesus' ancestors, but because they weren't the kind of people who made it into genealogies.

Tamar was a widow who tricked the great Israelite Judah into impregnating her. Rahab was a prostitute who helped hide Israelite spies in a foreign country. Ruth was a Moabite who married into the faith. And the wife of Uriah we know by her real name, Bathsheba. She was seduced by King David, who had her husband killed in battle. All of sudden, this family tree has some serious knots in it.

There are several reasons these four don't belong in this genealogy, according to Jewish historical rules. First, as you probably guessed, they are women, and as you may know, women had no authority in the patriarchal Jewish culture. The bloodline was always passed down through the male, so genealogies – and, sadly, the culture in general – had no use for women other than to be bearers of the next generation. In addition, these four women were associated with usual marriages, sex scandals, and illegitimate children. Hardly the kind of people you want pictures of in your family photo album.

But there's something else more peculiar about the inclusion of these four women. None of them were Jewish. They may have married into the faith, but their blood contained the stain of the Gentiles. And yet, here they are, in the genealogy of Jesus! Why did Matthew include them? If he's trying to make the case to his Jewish readers that Jesus the Jew is the Jewish Messiah, why would he include foreign women of potentially ill repute? Biblical historians know for a fact that he left out a few of the male names in order to get symmetry; there were actually more than 14 generations in between David and the exile. So if you can cut out a king here and there to make the numbers match, why not cut out those that seem to detract from your purpose?

Well, what is the purpose? Is it simply to show that Jesus is the Messiah for the Jews, or is there more at work here? If you remember, when God gave the initial blessing to Abraham in Genesis 12, God said that all nations would be blessed through Abraham. And in the very last words of Matthew, what we call the Great Commission, the resurrected Jesus commands his followers to go and make disciples of all nations. Thus, in his opening chapter, Matthew sets the stage that Jesus didn't just come for one group of people, he came for everyone, including those that others might consider outside of God's grace, unworthy of the gift of Jesus.

In our world, that unworthiness isn't just determined by ethnicity or gender. Too often the church has told people that if they don't get right with Jesus they'll be cut off, they won't belong. But as I read Matthew's genealogy, I hear a different message. I hear that God worked through a prostitute and a widow and an adulterer and a lot of bad kings and an unwed mother named Mary to bring us Jesus. This would have been scandalous to Matthew's original readers. And yet, it's a reminder that this story is a thoroughly human story. When we think of the birth of Jesus, we picture cute little lambs and cuddly donkeys and singing angels and then we cover it all with glitter and tinsel. But Matthew tells us right away: don't over-romanticize this story, because before Jesus is even born, this family is complicated.

I find comfort in that, because families are just as complicated today. In fact, just the word “family” is fraught with difficulty, because it now describes every scenario under the sun, from single people to blended families to foster families to adopted families to disconnected families to families deeply seated in their ancestry to families who are doing their best to disassociate with their ancestry. And what Matthew’s genealogy tells us is...we all belong. From the straight-laced do-gooder to the rebellious scoundrel to that one weird uncle...we all belong.

That’s going to be the theme of Jesus’ ministry, a ministry that starts with a birth in a cattle stall and an announcement to a bunch of outcast shepherds. You belong. Tax collectors belong. Prostitutes belong. Women belong. Skeptics belong. Marginalized people belong.

But, if we’re going to be true to Matthew’s story, you know who else belongs? Racists belong. Homophobes belong. Prisoners belong. That weird uncle belongs. Why? Because Jesus’ story is a story of redemption, and no one is outside of Christ’s power to redeem. Now, someone can choose to not accept that redemption, to stay mired in their sin, but everyone – everyone – deserves a chance to receive God’s grace as given to us through Jesus Christ.

There’s one more thing this genealogy reminds us. Just as we are influenced by those who have come before us, so we have the opportunity to have the same influence on those who follow us. There’s a Native American philosophy called the Seventh Generation Principle that states the decisions we make today have an impact for seven generations into the future. That means there are consequences for our actions that outlive us, and the ripple effect can be felt through generations.

We are blessed to be part of this grand story, a story that started with Adam and Eve in a garden and has been passed down from generation to generation, woven like a golden thread through the tapestry of time, until we hold it in our hands and in our hearts. It’s a story about a little baby, born under the most unusual of circumstances, born to an unwed immigrant couple, born to show us that we belong, born to save the world from itself. It’s a story of heroes and scoundrels, wicked men and defiant women, Jews and Gentiles, a story told for each of us and for all of us.

This Advent, as we await the birth of Jesus once again, let us remember all those who’ve come before us who made it possible for us to know and love this story. Some of them may have been heroes, a few may have been scoundrels, but we are here today because of their thoroughly human stories of faith. They planted a spiritual seed that has come to fruition in us. Dr. Christine Hong says, “We are the hopes of those who’ve come before us and we live in hope for those who will come after us.” From Abraham to David to Jesus to us. May we continue to plant seeds of faith that will bear fruit for God’s kingdom in the future.