

“Forty-Two Generations”

Matthew 1.1-17

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Mason, Michigan

November 29, 2015

Advent I

You’re going to need your Bible for this one. Go ahead, pull it out from under the pew; it won’t bite. I want you to open the Bible to the very first page of the New Testament, Matthew’s gospel, chapter 1. We’re going to look at a genealogy today. I know, some of you have told me you find genealogies really *boring*. Well, I tell you, this is the genealogy of Jesus, and it is anything *but* boring – and there’s a very clear message for *you*, embedded in all these names. I’m going to help you see it.

“A record of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham” (Matthew 1.1) – that’s how it begins. It traces the whole line, from Abraham down to Joseph, “the husband of Mary – of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ.” (Matthew 1.16) This is how Matthew chooses to open his gospel. Luke includes a genealogy similar to (but different from) this one, but he doesn’t open his gospel with it. Mark and John don’t include a genealogy at all. But Matthew chooses to start his gospel with these words. When the New Testament was compiled, Matthew was chosen to be the first gospel, so when you open the New Testament and start at the beginning, this is what you see. A genealogy. Not a birth story, not a miracle, not a grand theological treatise. A genealogy. That’s how it begins – a record of forty-two generations that connects Jesus’s earthly father back all the way to Abraham.

Now all the evidence suggests that Matthew’s first audience was a group of Christians who had converted from Judaism. These were people who *knew* the scriptures, what we call the “Old Testament.” They would see these names – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Josiah – and *immediately* those names would call to mind the *stories* that they had been raised on: the stories of their faithful – and not-so-faithful – ancestors. If you don’t know the Old Testament, then these names will be just names. But hopefully, from your upbringing in the church and from your own individual study and from what we’ve been doing here together these past few years, you will look at this list of names and respond the same way Matthew’s first readers did: “I know these names! I remember those stories!” Stories of faith, doubt, courage, fear, hope, despair. *Human* stories. *Real* stories.

There’s Abraham, whom God called to leave his homeland and set out on a grand new adventure at the ripe young age of seventy-five. Abraham had that audacious faith that inspired him to believe in God’s promises against all odds and that prompted him to trust God when God told him to

lead his son to a sacrificial altar. There's Isaac, that long-hoped-for baby who grew up and married beautiful Rebekah after that memorable conversation Abraham's servant had at the well. There's Jacob, that mischievous trickster who stole his brother's birthright, spent years in hiding, woke up the morning after his wedding to discover the wrong woman in his bed, and fathered twelve sons, who became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. These are not just *names*. These are *stories*. These are *people*.

The line continues from Jacob: Judah, Perez, Hezron, Aram, Amminidab, Nahshon, Salmon, Boaz, Obed, Jesse, and David – fourteen generations from Abraham to David. Some of those names are obscure, but some are familiar. There's Boaz, whom we've been talking about for two weeks now. David, of course, becomes the first great Israelite king; we'll be talking about him soon. After David, there's another cycle of fourteen generations, beginning with Solomon, who built the temple in Jerusalem and who was known for his wisdom. The next twelve were all kings of Judah – Rehoboam, Abijah, Asaph, Jehoshaphat, Joram, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, Amos, and Josiah. You can learn about them in the books of Kings and Chronicles. Most of them were *pretty bad kings!*

Then, Matthew lists fourteen more names – Jechoniah, Shealtiel, Zerubbabel, Abiud, Eliakim, Azor, Zadok, Achim, Eluid, Eleazar, Matthan, Jacob, then finally Joseph, the husband of Mary, who gave birth to Jesus. Most of those names are unknowns, except for a few at the beginning – who lived during the tumultuous days of the Babylonian invasion and the destruction of Jerusalem – and except for Joseph and Jesus at the very end. Matthew concludes: “So there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen generations from the exile to Babylon to the Christ” (Matthew 1.17) – forty-two generations in all.

So Matthew offers this long list of names, a family tree that encapsulates memories throughout the whole Old Testament story. So ... where's the message?

Did you notice that a few *women* got mentioned? Not all of them, to be sure. There's no mention of Sarah, or Rebekah, or Rachel or Leah or Bilhah or Zilpah, or any of the other women whose names we know – with four important exceptions: (1) Verse 3: “Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was *Tamar*.” (2) Verse 5: “Salmon was the father of Boaz, whose mother was *Rahab*.” (3) Verse 5, again: “Boaz was the father of Obed, whose mother was *Ruth*.” (4) Verse 6: “David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of *Uriah*.” Matthew is going out of his way to mention *four specific women* – women who had particularly *unusual* roles to play in God's drama of salvation. He didn't have to mention *any* of these; he could have just listed the men, the way Luke does over in Luke 3. But, no: Matthew chooses to remind his readers of *four specific women* – four specific situations: (1) Tamar, who (way back in Genesis 38) dressed up like a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law Judah, who was failing to do his duty where she was concerned following the death of her husband. (2) Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute in the city of Jericho who (back in Joshua 2 and 6) hid the Israelite spies from the Canaanite king and who helped them escape, betraying her city and her whole people. (3) Ruth, the Moabite who emigrated to Israel with her mother-in-law Naomi, and who, on Naomi's advice, put Boaz in a compromising position in the middle of the night on a threshing floor, resulting in redemption and protection for Naomi. (4) Bathsheba, who was married to David's general and whom David lusted after and slept with, ultimately resulting in a situation in which David arranged to have

Bathsheba's husband murdered. Four women, four unusual stories, four *scandals*. Matthew didn't mention all the *normal* childbirths, the *normal* mothers – but he's going out of his way to remind us of these four scandalous stories. We've got two prostitutes, two foreigners, two men sleeping with women they shouldn't be sleeping with. There's betrayal, there are uncovered "feet" on the threshing floor, there's lust and infidelity and treachery and murder – and Matthew is *deliberately* highlighting these scandalous memories, right here in his opening paragraphs. He's telling us: *Jesus' ancestors were not perfect*. They were *flawed*. They *committed great sins in the eyes of the Lord*. They were *human*.

They're a lot like us.

Every family has skeletons in its closet. There's your uncle Harvey, who abused his wife. There's your aunt Millie, the drunk. There's your cousin Bobby, who killed a cop in a drug bust. There's your grandmother Eunice, who birthed a child at age 15. And then, there's *you*, and the things *you* do, or did, that you still feel guilty about. There are skeletons hidden in *every* family's closet, scandals in every generation. The truth is that our ancestors weren't perfect, our relatives weren't perfect, *we* aren't perfect. We all make choices, either planned or in the heat of the moment, that we desperately wish we could go back and un-do. But ... we can't. We have to live with the memories, live with the fallout. Maybe some of it was kept quiet and we think we can take the secret to the grave with us ... and maybe some of it was front-page news. Either way, the truth is ... *we're flawed*. *We sin*. *We're human*.

And God can do something with the mistakes we make. Sometimes ... something *wonderful*. God took what Judah and Tamar did, and turned it into something *wonderful*. God took Rahab's prostitution and betrayal, and turned it into something *wonderful*. God took Ruth's *chutzpah* and turned it into something *wonderful*. God took David's lust and infidelity and murderous plots and turned it into something *wonderful*. Matthew reminds his readers of four scandalous memories, and God took *every single one of those scandals* and made something *wonderful* come out of it – because at the end of all those names, there's *Jesus*, at the end of the line. God doesn't condone the bad choices we make – but God can *use* the mistakes we make for his *own* purposes, his own *redemptive* purposes. Just because "mistakes were made" doesn't mean that we should live with regret and shame our whole life. God took Tamar and Rahab and Ruth and Bathsheba – and made *Jesus* come out of that!

So you've got a drunk in your family. Or a gambler, or an abuser, or a murderer. Or somebody who was unfaithful, maybe more than once. There are skeletons in your family's closet; there are secrets you don't want anyone to know about. There is shame and regret you're living with because of your *own* poor choices. Don't you think it's time to just ... *let it go*? Give it over to God? Let God's grace and forgiveness and mercy wash over you? The mistakes of the past do *not* have to determine the future. The good news of the gospel is that no matter how big the sin, when you confess, when you genuinely repent, you get a fresh start. A *clean* start. The slate is wiped clean. The memories might remain, but the shame and guilt don't have to. God says to you: "It's okay. I still love you. And I forgive you." Then, God can take those bad things we did, and make something *good* come out of them. It might not happen this year, maybe not even this century. But, in God's own time, God can take the messes we've made, and turn them into something *wonderful*. Something *beautiful*. Something ... *holy*.

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