



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

Sermons

“Stories, Surprises, and Shooting Stars”

Matthew 1:1-17

December 23, 2018 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

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Yes.

You read that right.

My scripture this morning is Matthew 1:1-17. The passage we refer to fondly as “The Begats.” I don’t know about you, but I usually just kind of skip over this part to get to Joseph and the angel, Baby Jesus, and the wise men with their gold, frankincense and myrrh. But if we actually pause a moment and consider the way Matthew describes the genealogy of Jesus, we might just find a few surprises...

And just to make sure we don’t drift off as we listen to the scripture this morning, my first surprise for you is the way we will hear this list!

“Matthew’s Begats” by Andrew Peterson https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snURV57_tjo

Abraham had Isaac

Isaac, he had Jacob

Jacob, he had Judah and his kin

Then Perez and Zerah

Came from Judah's woman, Tamar

Perez, he brought Hezron up

And then came

Aram, then Amminadab

Then Nahshon, who was then the dad of Salmon

Who with Rahab fathered Boaz

Ruth, she married Boaz who had Obed

Who had Jesse

Jesse, he had David who we know as king

David, he had Solomon by dead Uriah's wife
Solomon, well you all know him
He had good old Rehoboam
Followed by Abijah who had Asa
Asa had Jehoshaphat had Joram had Uzziah
Who had Jotham then Ahaz then Hezekiah

Followed by Manasseh who had Amon
Who was a man
Who was father of a good boy named Josiah
Who grandfathered Jehoiachin
Who caused the Babylonian captivity
Because he was a liar

Then he had Shealtiel, who begat Zerubbabel
Who had Abiud who had Eliakim
Eliakim had Azor who had Zadok who had Akim
Akim was the father of Eliud then
He had Eleazar who had Matthan who had Jacob
Now, listen very closely
I don't want to sing this twice
Jacob was the father of Joseph
The husband of Mary
The mother of Christ

My Uncle Neal is really into genealogy... I mean *really* into genealogy. He's traced various branches of our family tree back to centuries that only have three digits. He will occasionally send out an email with a new interesting connection – some of which I even find interesting...

The thing is, it's never the list itself that is interesting. It's the stories behind the list. Simply knowing that one of my 10 greats grandfathers was a man named Samuel Chapin is not all that interesting. Knowing that he was known as "the

puritan” and the iconic statue in Springfield, Massachusetts called “The Puritan” was made in honor of him – pretty cool.

My 7 greats grandfather was the first Lutheran to be ordained in the New World.

My 5 greats grandfather and grandmother – Archibald and Abigail Luddington were pioneer settlers of Portage Township, Michigan.

And the renowned Kalamazoo milliner, Ethol Hotelling was my fourth or fifth cousin.

Stories. Connections. That’s what genealogies are about.

When the canon of the Bible was discussed, discerned and decided upon in the fourth century, the framers chose this passage – this list of ancestors as the way to begin the story of Jesus.

This is so much more than simply a list of who Jesus' ancestors were—it's a narrative of God's love - a tribute to God's grace throughout redemptive history. These names tell stories about the ways God has reached out to God's people throughout history, culminating in Jesus Christ – Godself, poured out in human form, breaking into the story of God's people.

Matthew's list starts the way one would expect in describing the lineage of a king in a patriarchal society. We start with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the recognized patriarchs of the people of Israel. God promised Abraham that a great nation would come from him, and sure enough, many generations later, that promise has been fulfilled in spades! Beginning with Abraham places Jesus in the family of the people of Israel – a necessary qualification for the Jewish Messiah.

From Abraham, he goes on through the generations to King David, God's chosen king through whom the promises to Abraham seemed destined to be fulfilled. But, as we know, David was not the one to bring in God's kingdom. David, and all of Israel with him, broke the covenant and the story of Israel began its sharp decline, resulting in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the exile of

God's people. It seemed that the hope of God's kingdom in the world was but a fleeting moment – a shooting star: visible one moment and gone the next – rather than the steadfast light in the darkness they were waiting for.

But, as is often the case in the story of God's redemption of God's people, things were not what they seemed. The exile was not the end of the story for David's line or for God's people. The story continues, after the exile. Zerubbabel led the first group of Jews returning to Israel from Babylon and was instrumental in the rebuilding of the Temple...and then we enter a list of largely unknown names, unknown to us at least, that lead us down the generations to an ordinary carpenter named Joseph, his wife Mary, and her son, Jesus – a descendent of Abraham and David, and therefore in the rightful line of succession to claim his place as King of the Jews.

Ah, but wait. This is no ordinary royal line. This is no ordinary recital of ancestors. This lineage has some surprises.

The obvious thing that jumps out and surprises many people is that there are five women named in this genealogy. But that's not really the surprise. While family lines tended to be traced through the fathers and male names dominate the genealogical lists in the Bible, the occasional mention of a woman to deepen connections to another important branch of the family is fairly common. A woman's name in a genealogy, though, is always an invitation to notice and look more deeply at the circumstances behind her inclusion.

And that's where the surprise comes in. You see, the stories of each of the women mentioned in Jesus' genealogy are...complicated. These are women whose stories Matthew's first readers would have known – stories of disgrace, manipulation, immorality, incest, and redemption.

The first mentioned is Tamar. Her story can be found in Genesis 38. She was the wife of Judah's eldest son Er. The writers of Genesis tell us that Er was found to be evil in God's sight and died, leaving Tamar childless. According to the law of Levirate marriage, she had a right to marry his brother and be given a child by him. She married the brother, but he schemed to refuse her the child she was

owed, and he, too, died, leaving her childless. There was a third brother, but Judah was hesitant to fulfill his obligation to Tamar by allowing her to marry his third son, Shelah. The other two died after she had married them. Perhaps she brought with her some sort of curse.

The thing we have to keep in mind here, is that the reason the Levirate marriage laws existed were not only to ensure the continuation of the family line, but to protect women who might otherwise be left without a means of support in later life. Judah kept Tamar in a perpetual state of waiting for Shelah, unwilling to allow her to marry him, and unwilling to release her so that she might marry someone else. She was in a tough place.

So, she used the only power available to her. She disguised herself as a prostitute, seduced Judah himself, and became pregnant. When she was discovered to be pregnant, Judah was furious and called for her to be killed. Fortunately, Tamar had cleverly protected herself and the identity of the father of the twins she carried by holding onto Judah's personal belongings – his cord and seal and staff – items that identified him as surely as a driver's license or passport would today. Judah acknowledged his paternity and Tamar's righteousness, saving the life of this determined woman, and ensuring the continuation of the line. This is the story of the birth of Perez, the ancestor of Jesus.

The second woman Matthew tells us about is Rahab. She didn't have to disguise herself. She actually was a prostitute. And a Canaanite. This is a woman who lived on the fringes of society, providing for her parents and siblings in the only ways that she could – making a living as a prostitute and protecting the spies of the very people who would destroy her city, leaving her family as the only survivors.

Rahab is looking for a better life. She has heard the stories of God's guidance and protection of God's people. She realizes that Jericho is the gate to Canaan and she knows that the Israelites are going to have to take the city in order to get into the land their God has promised them. She decides to throw in her lot with the people of God – a God who has demonstrated care for the outcast. She marries Salmon, a

Jew, and gives birth to Boaz – whose story brings us to the third woman Matthew mentions.

Ruth, too was a Gentile - a Moabite. Her ancestry had its origin in the rape of Lot by his eldest daughter in the aftermath of the destruction of Sodom. Moabites were forbidden from worshiping at the Temple or intermarrying with Jews. When Ruth came to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, Naomi, after the death of their husbands, she came as an outsider. She was forced to glean in the fields in order to support herself and Naomi. In order to secure her future, Naomi sent her in to seduce Boaz, who, being a righteous man, married her. Their son, Obed, was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

The fourth woman is Bathsheba – although the genealogy only refers to her as “the wife of Uriah, the Hittite.” I can’t help but wonder why she is not named – especially when the others are. Is her story so well known that she simply needs no introduction? Or is Matthew emphasizing the fact that this wife of King David and mother of Solomon was first the wife of another? She was brought – enticed? forced? into an adulterous relationship with David, who had her husband killed to cover up his sins. As a result of adultery and murder, she became a part of the story of Jesus.

Finally, we come to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Regardless of what we now read in the Bible about angelic visitors and conception by the Holy Spirit, the reality of her situation involved a measure of disgrace. She became pregnant with Jesus before her wedding, and the Child’s father was not her betrothed, Joseph. This scandal would have lingered like a cloud in the whispers and suspicions of her wider family and fellow Nazarenes for many years.

All five of these women share something in common: disgrace. These women either committed or suffered disgrace. They had tainted reputations. They likely would have endured the contempt of others. And at least the first four would have struggled with very painful, even sordid memories.

And here's the thing. Most of us want to conceal the more disgraceful events and people in our families. But that's not the case here. Matthew is making the point, even before he tells of the birth of Jesus, that Jesus is entering into the messy reality of human history. Brian McClaren says, "He is part of the story of Gentiles as well as Jews, broken and messy families as well as noble ones, normal folks as well as kings and priests and people. We might say that Jesus isn't entering humanity from the top with a kind of trickle-down grace, but rather from the bottom, with grace that rises from the grass roots up."¹

Even in the genealogies God weaves grace, redeeming brokenness, producing beauty out of pain, reaching out to those forgotten by society, and making all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose (Romans 8:28). God's love enters the world in the unlikeliest vessel of all – that of a vulnerable baby born of a messy and broken line of messy and broken people.

The story of God's redemption of God's people often rests on the stories of marginal people in society. Scripture tells us the stories of Samaritans, lepers, concubines, younger sons, slaves, dreamers, shepherds, widows, foreigners – the people forgotten, abused, and disenfranchised by society. The witness of scripture is clear – those who exploit the poor, the widow, the orphan, or the foreigner will not prosper, and those who are generous to them will be found in God's favor.

The poor were especially central to the life and ministry of Jesus. When he teaches in the Temple, the passage from Isaiah that he opens to summarizes his call, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The good news Jesus brings is not a word of comfort to those who are already comfortable. Instead it is a challenge. Through Jesus, God calls us to be of one

¹ Brian McClaren, "We Make the Road by Walking," 2014, p 76.

mind – to seek the well-being of others rather than our own comfort, to love radically, inclusively, abundantly, just as God loves us.

Through the surprising women of Jesus' genealogy, we are reminded that God's light entered the world through the cracks of brokenness in the lives of God's people.

I want to close today with a reflection I read this week from McCormick professor Shawna Bowman:

The place we are the most vulnerable is often where we carry our deepest truth,

the spaces we fear most show us something we need to see in order to grow,

the thing that makes us feel the most inept, or undesirable is where God sees beauty and possibility.

Do not mistake your human vulnerabilities as punishment my friends,

This soft, tender skin is the very container God chooses when God enters the world,

This heart, and lungs and human bone is the very container God chooses

when God chooses us.

This human experience that fills us with equal parts awe and frustration on any given day is the very way God chooses to love us.

On this Advent Day, as you wait for God's arrival, remember God is already here.

With us.

Already ready.

Already waiting.

Tender, loving and full of grace.²

² <https://www.facebook.com/more.light.presbyterians/photos/pb.7381408114.-2207520000.1545502010./10157379173608115/?type=3&theater>