



“What’s in a Name?”

a sermon by

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This Advent season (I know, I'm still in shock that it's Advent, too) we will be walking through the gospel accounts of the birth of Christ and exploring the characters within them. As you will undoubtedly pass countless nativity scenes this year, and hear Christmas songs on the radio that call up images of the manger and heavenly choruses and wealthy visitors to the Christ child, I thought it might be helpful to get to know them all a little better and think on why their role in the story is so important. We will begin this week with a reading that is a bit uncommon for this season, though no less significant. It prefaces the famous visit from the angel to the virgin Mary, and all the shepherds and wisemen and, being a little less illustrative, rarely gets a hearing over the holidays, though it is just as crucial a component to the story of Jesus as shepherds and mangers. Our reading today comes from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 1:1-17. It is the genealogy of Jesus. Bear with me- and hear the Word of the Lord:

“An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.”

I know what you're thinking, 'Why did I come to Wednesday Worship today?' Admittedly it is hard to keep up with a text that doesn't have a whole lot of narrative action to hold your attention. I was even beginning to have my doubts when I was sifting through my Bible dictionary to make sure I pronounced all these names correctly (I make you no promises about this, by the way) and the spell-checker on my computer and I am no longer on speaking terms. But while the Christmas story takes center stage, this passage is left waiting in the wings though it tells a story that is just as central a component to the birth of Christ as anyone or thing that makes it to the giant holiday flannel board in our minds. Of the two gospels that tell of Jesus' birth, Matthew's is the only one to begin in this way. And though this cluster of names doesn't seem like much of a narrative, they most certainly have a story to tell.

But before you start sketching Jesus' family tree on the back of your bulletin, I should tell you that this isn't really his family. Not technically, at least. Technically, Matthew's so-called genealogy is full of holes and inconsistencies. Luke repeats this genealogy later in his gospel, and there are only a few similarities and as Matthew tells it, there are more than just a few impossibilities within the account as well. Like the one about the woman who mothered a son who fathered a child 400 years later. Needless to say, a few pieces are missing. For those of us on the quest for the historical Jesus, this may feel like a sham, though not much of a surprise. In the ancient tradition it was nearly impossible to trace anyone's lineage with much accuracy, and so the tendency was to hit the high points and wing the rest according to memory or intended message. We're not so different today, really. Within my own family tree what stands out in my mind is a fragmented memory based on the heroes and horror stories beginning with William Brewster, my great-times-13 grandfather who was the elder chaplain on the Mayflower and quite possibly the founder of Thanksgiving. Moving through more recent years with Abner Doubleday, who is credited with formalizing the rules of baseball, and rounding out finally with Robert Starkweather, who killed his entire family. Not so illustrious a history when it is taken as a whole, though surely many meaningful parts are missing. So while we see that the data of Jesus' descent doesn't hold, we also see that Matthew tells his story of the genealogy of Jesus, not to convey his ancestry, but to tell something of God's work in the lives of his people both individually and as a nation who contributed to and culminated in the person of Jesus.

He begins with Abraham, a Gentile before God claimed him and founded his covenant in him, and continues with the story of God working through Gentiles until he reaches David, even citing a few women of questionable repute like the widowed Tamar who slept with her father-in-law to bear a child, or Rahab, a Gentile adulteress, and Ruth, a Moabite. In an era when giving women a place of significance in a royal line wasn't kosher, Matthew picks some questionable ones by the standards of society when there were certainly plenty of noble women like Abraham's wife Sara to go around. But after David, all the names Matthew gives are kings up until another benchmark when he lists a few prophets until finally, to ensure that all the paperwork is in order on Jesus' royal Hebrew lineage, he ties them all to Joseph, Mary's husband, who adopted Jesus after the Holy Spirit fathered him. So, if the generations described here were to become flesh in the body of Christ, he might, according to Matthew, have Gentile bones, Jewish muscle, royal blood, and a prophetic voice. And indeed he did.

What Matthew is asking us to believe is not his ancient history, but his modern message. That though Jesus was born so many generations after Abraham and through so many unknown paths, his story actually began with him. Because this genealogy does not trace Christ's bloodlines, it traces God's faithfulness. It is not the story of ancestry, it is the story of the covenant that began in Abraham, was thought to be close to fulfillment in David but was then broken, that was lamented in exile, reestablished through the prophets, culminated in Jesus born in a manger and that continues still today and will remain until the end of the world because of Christ, the true, royal 'son of David' as far as the kingdom of God is concerned. Anointed by God to be the last king and ruler of the earth - who will carry out the reign of God's faithfulness, and will rule not with the sword, but with the strength and power of love. Now that is a compelling narrative.

If we were to ask each person mentioned here to tell us about their family history as it relates to Jesus they would probably tell us the story of the family of faith. They would tell us about the way God guides the course of human history and leads an unfaithful and fallen people when it looks like there is no hope. How God is working even when we break the covenant, and wander in exile, and are outsiders and break moral law and God's law because he loves us still. Loves us enough that his work can be seen not just in the fuzzy sentiments in Christmas cards but in the way he clings to and transforms the lives of ordinary people like you and me. Like David and Amos and Rahab and Eleazar and Jeroboam and Solomon, Sarah and Abraham and Ruth. Loves us enough that, though God could raise up children of Abraham from stones (Matthew 3:9) he instead chooses to work through the likes of us. Loves us enough to raise up a Savior that the covenant and the world had been preparing for thousands of years through the blood and tears and courage of countless heroes and horror stories of the faith. The word that Matthew uses for 'genealogy' may also be translated 'Genesis'- as in, 'a new beginning.' God did a new thing in Jesus, but it was based on the same story of God's faithfulness that spanned generations before Christ and will extend until the end of time. Reaching into our lives and using ordinary people like Mary and Joseph, Tamar and David, to carry out an uncommon work of the kingdom by guiding their collective path to bring about redemption and salvation for the world.

Take a close look at that list of names there in the beginning of Matthew- those souls lingering on the outskirts of the nativity scene. They are part of your family of faith. They and countless others are what brought us here. They prepared the way for Christ. Look at them and see what God is doing for you. Blessing your faithfulness. Filling in the gaps where you leave off. Turning the offspring of your self-interest into agents of righteousness. Binding up the broken fragments of the human story- your story- into a seamless narrative about his covenant of love and your complete inability now to break it and God's unwillingness to abandon it. Because you are brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. Sons and daughters of God most high. You have been adopted into this family. So when the evening comes when we will stand in hushed awe in the manger at the bedside of our sleeping Savior we can truly say that this child was born for us- prepared since the beginning of time, promised and long-awaited, this child is ours to celebrate. This is Advent- the 'arrival', the coming of Christ. Making ancient promises new, working in and through the lives of you and I. Moving and transforming the world time and again, each and every day. Forever and ever. Amen.¹

¹ Keck, Leander, ed., *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1995, p. 131.