

“Climbing Around in the Family Tree” (fn.:DOCUMENT2)

Scripture: Matthew 1:1-17

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In 1611, a new translation of the Bible, one of the first ever into English, was presented to King James, the King of Great Britain. This Bible has come to be known as the King James Version of the Bible. And for over 4 centuries, this Bible has shaped our English language. I am choosing this morning to borrow from the King James Version because it follows the Greek text more closely. Over and over again in this text, we have the Greek verb for “fathering, siring, causing to be.” The NRSV—the pew Bible—chose to render this Greek verb as “to be the father of.” The King James Version kept the verb form—using the verb “begat.” A verb we don’t use much anymore. So this morning, I am going to read from New Revised Standard Version, but I am going to follow the verb choice of the King James Version (Matthew 1:1-17):

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

² *Abraham begat Isaac, and Isaac begat Jacob, and Jacob begat Judah and his brothers, ³ and Judah begat Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez begat Hezron, and Hezron begat Aram, ⁴ and Aram begat Aminadab, and Aminadab begat Nahshon, and Nahshon begat Salmon, ⁵ and Salmon begat Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz begat Obed by Ruth, and Obed begat Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse begat King David.*

And David begat Solomon by the wife of Uriah, ⁷ and Solomon begat Rehoboam, and Rehoboam begat Abijah, and Abijah begat Asaph, ⁸ and Asaph begat Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat begat Joram, and Joram begat Uzziyah, ⁹ and Uzziyah begat Jotham, and Jotham begat Ahaaz, and Ahaaz begat Hezekiah, ¹⁰ and Hezekiah begat Manasseh, and Manasseh begat Amos, and Amos begat Josiah, ¹¹ and Josiah begat Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

¹² *And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah begat Salathiel, and Salathiel begat Zerubbabel, ¹³ and Zerubbabel begat Abiud, and Abiud begat Eliakim, and Eliakim begat Azor, ¹⁴ and Azor begat Zadok, and Zadok begat Achim, and Achim begat Eliud, ¹⁵ and Eliud begat Eleazar, and Eleazar begat Matthan, and Matthan begat Jacob, ¹⁶ and Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.*

¹⁷ *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.*

One of the old complaints about reading the Bible was having to read all these “begats.” And, by making that complaint, we cloud over how radical this passage is. What kind of sermon could be in this long list of names? More than perhaps you expect: Let me break it down into the following: the unknown fathers and mothers, the known fathers, and the women!

The unknowns...how many of you know the names of your great-grandparents? By and large, in three generations, our names float into obscurity. In the latter half of this genealogy, we don’t really know anything about the figures beyond Zerubbabel—more than 10 names that have no history...just names of the father alone, and none of the mothers!

Just outside the sanctuary, facing the graveyard, is our memorial wall—a list of names. And my hunch is only a very few of us could identify everyone on that list—that’s less than 50 years and names are now obscure. And if you happen to look at the listing of those buried in the graveyard, those names would be even more obscure. Oh, you might recognize James White, Mary Grainger Blount, and Samuel Carrick...but what about Elizabeth Kennedy, the consort of William S.

Kennedy, aged 20 years, 2 month and 9 days? And lest you think that the word “consort” implies some illicit relationship, it rather reflects that in death we all become royalty in the kingdom of heaven. And Elizabeth joined her son who was born one month prior to her death—her son lived but one day. Her son is buried beside her. What a story is here...but unknown to us.

I am convinced that we just don't know all the factors that go into our lives—I am not talking about our sub-conscious but our history. The unknowns—all the figures that play a part in our lives are also part of Jesus' life. And God is at work in that mix...in all those unknowns.

Moving from the unknowns, we have some knowns in Jesus' genealogy: big names like Abraham, the founding father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; King David, the greatest hero in Israelite history—think how that story of David and Goliath has been told and retold. And, indeed, the expectation of the Messiah revolved around David—the Messiah will be David's kin, the Messiah will be from the “root of Jesse” (Jesse, of course, being David's father). And then, in this genealogy, Joseph himself—he gets role in every crèche or nativity scene...but he tends to fade into the woodwork. Mark Pace and I were a bit stumped in trying to find Christmas carols or hymns that feature Joseph—and we were stumped, particularly as we reflected on all the carols that focused on Mary, but none on Joseph.

But here is another oddity. We know Joseph...but why is this genealogy through Joseph? What is quite absolute in the nativity story is this fact: Joseph was not the father of Jesus. And the genealogy does not say that Joseph begat Jesus—unlike all the other fathers listed. So, why is this genealogy through Joseph?

In short, it is because adoption is a holy vow that establishes a child as connected and belonging. Both in Hebrew culture and the Roman-Greco culture of the day, adoption was just as valid and real as biology. In fact, the reigning emperor, Augustus, had the family name of Caesar by way of adoption—he was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. And that adoption brought with it all the rights, privileges, respect, equality, and honor of being a “biological child.”

Adoption establishes belonging and connection. I know this from very personal experience. As you may know, our daughter Julia is adopted. Sheri did all the administrative work to make it happen—and there is a lot to do—but I often tell people that I did the “labor and delivery,” as I traveled by myself to an orphanage not far from Siberia, Russia and brought back our daughter. At the orphanage, I met our daughter Yulia Rubsova—five years old at the time. I had a grainy, black-and-white picture of the child who was to become our daughter. And let me be frank here—it was not an attractive picture. As I was waiting for the orphanage director to bring our child to the reception area for our first meeting, I was coaching myself: “There is no such thing as an ugly child. There is no such thing as an ugly child.” I was bracing myself to be ready. When Yulia Rubsova entered the room, I saw a beautiful child. My first thought was “They have switched out—this is not the same child as in the photo...but it was her, our daughter.” All that worry and self-coaching was for nothing!

Joseph knew something about adoption. You may recall what the angel says to Joseph: ‘You are to take Mary as your wife—not to put her aside quietly but go through with the marriage.’ And, says the angel, ‘you are to name the child.’ And, Joseph did exactly that—he took Mary as his wife and he was the one who named the child. That naming is a particularly clear statement: this is Joseph's child...this baby is a descendant of David. Joseph indeed is his “daddy.” Joseph adopts the child as

his own. And, like Augustus Caesar who was adopted, this adoption was just as valid and real as biology.

There are unknowns and knowns in this genealogy of Jesus...and then there are women. Now, many of the well-known women are left out—Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel (and those are the few we know). But consider the women that are named. The first is Tamar. Her story is definitely not PG-13. Her husband died and the law was that the husband's brother was to take her as one of his wives—the Social Security of the day. Her father-in-law stepped in and stopped that...only later to be in relationship with his daughter-in-law and begat a son! Incest is a game the whole family can play!

And then there is Rahab. In Jericho, she operated a business-establishment in the red-candle district—sort of the pre-cursor to the “red light district.” Her business is legal today in a few counties in Nevada and handful of countries. And I understand that there were similar establishments just a few blocks from the church up until the 1960s—one of those businesses that were known to law enforcement, but they looked the other way—especially since city fathers might be consumers of “the product.” Rahab is in the family tree.

And then there is Ruth, an immigrant from a country that was known for despising Israel. She would be exactly the kind of person that a border wall would be meant to keep out.

And then, considering all the mothers in Jesus' line that are NOT mentioned, there is a woman who is not named but identified—she is identified as “the wife of Uriah,” but King David is one who does the “begetting,” not Uriah. Yes, some have suggested that she had an affair with King David. Or, much more likely, she was a woman who had no power...she was the victim to the powerful—she could join the #Metoo movement.

So, here's what we have: Tamar—incest; Rahab—an illegal profession; Ruth—an unwanted, unwelcome immigrant; and the wife of Uriah (she has a name, Bathsheba, but not included in this genealogy), who ends up marrying King David (who, incidentally, arranged for the murder of her husband, Uriah). Adultery and murder! Top that off, with Mary, who is a mother-to-be before marriage!

What a lineage! I don't think I would have included these names if it were my genealogy. I am reminded of a column by Ralph McGill in the *Atlanta Constitution* years ago. McGill recounted the story of a woman who had done well in the world and decided that she wanted her genealogy published. She hired an author/researcher, who found out that she had a grandfather who had been convicted of murder in New York, served time at Sing Sing (a notorious penitentiary—think Brushy Mountain as the Tennessee equivalent or Alcatraz as the California equivalent), and this grandfather died in the electric chair. The woman told the researcher that her grandfather could not be included in her genealogy—his story was too shameful and embarrassing. The researcher said it had to go in, so they had come up with a creative way of telling it. So here is how the entry went: one of her grandfathers “had occupied the chair of applied electricity at one of America's best known institutions. He was very much attached to his position and literally died in the harness.”

Jesus' family...a complicated lot. Plenty of sinners, plenty of unknowns, plenty of heroes...and what women! This Christmas season, let us recall that we all have history...and it turns out that

God has a story too. God's story is through triumphs and disasters, through the blessings and curses of our genetics and our history. In all this, God's purpose is at work.

As you may know, the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel of John, does not set forth Jesus' genealogy or tell of his birth. What we have instead is the meaning of his birth. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is God's Word, and according to John 1:14, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Or, as Eugene Peterson paraphrased it: The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.

In moving into our neighborhood, God has a story too. God not only authors the story but God also enters the story. God enters the story that God is producing. Some of you may recall the film career of Alfred Hitchcock—a prolific and award-winning film director. Hitchcock always found a way to work himself into the film—a passing figure, a doorman, a clerk, and so on. He directed the film and he inserted himself into the film.

God has a story too—God has inserted God's self into our story. Centuries ago, St. Columba, one of three patron saints of Ireland, is recorded as saying: "Since all the world is but a story, it were well for you to buy the more enduring story, rather than the story that is less enduring." What story are you going to buy this season? The story that everything is random and by chance...the story that everything you want will be under the Christmas tree...or the more enduring story of God in Jesus' family tree...and...and in ours?