

2 Samuel 7:1-17

Matthew 1:1-17

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Second Sunday of Advent

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MATTHEW, JESUS, AND ANCESTRY.COM

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Helen Keller said, “There is no king who has not had a slave among his ancestors, and no slave who has not had a king among his.”

My grandfather once said something similar to me, although I wasn’t quite sure how to take it at the time. My sister, brother, and I called him Bumpa. In 1977, when I was accepted at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, I called Bumpa, who was 83, to tell him. He was a dyed-in-the-wool Presbyterian elder. I said, “Bumpa, I’m calling to tell you that I’ve been accepted to seminary and I’m going to study to be a Presbyterian minister.” Bumpa said, “Congratulations. We’ve never had a minister in the family before.” Then he paused and said, “But you know what they say — if you look back far enough in anyone’s family tree you’ll find a minister and a horse thief.” As I said, I wasn’t sure how to take what he said. Had I just been “dissed” by my own grandfather? Then Bumpa laughed and said, “I’m happy for you. Tell me about it.” Bumpa was right. Look back far enough in anyone’s family tree and you’ll find a minister and a horse thief and a king and a slave.

Thursday night I finished teaching Introduction to the New Testament at the University of Mount Olive. One of the study questions from Week Two, when we looked at the four gospels, asked, “How is a Gospel different from a biography? What is the purpose of an ancient biography, and how do these differ from contemporary biographies?” Most of the students correctly answered that ancient and contemporary biographies differ in their use of facts, dates, and concern for historical accuracy. The main purpose of an ancient biography was to convey the essence or core of the subject’s personality, so people would be motivated to adopt that noble trait. In other words, ancient biographies didn’t hang out someone’s dirty laundry or expose the skeletons in the subject’s closet quite as much as contemporary biographies do.

How many of you, either as a child or an adult, tried to read the Bible all the way through from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21, only to get bogged down with all of the “begats” when you got to 1 Chronicles? 406 continuous verses of “These are the sons of so-and-so” and “The descendants of so-and-so.” Maybe it would be more interesting if you could trace your ancestry back to Eliphaz (Abraham’s great-great-grandson) and his sons, Teman, Omar, Zephi, Gatam, Kenaz, Timna, and Amalek. Otherwise, reading through the family trees gets kind of tedious, doesn’t it?

www.ancestry.com advertises itself as the “world’s largest family history resource.” Using their resource and search tools, you can explore more than 10 billion family history records and 30 million family trees. ancestry.com also has a resource called Family Tree Maker. The online ad invites you to “Discover, preserve and share your family history.”

Matthew may have wished he could have used ancestry.com when he sat down to write his gospel. His is the only gospel that begins with Jesus’ family tree (although Luke includes a genealogy in chapter 3 of his story). Matthew 1:1-17 reads just like 1 Chronicles 1-9. In fact, when I typed a translation of those verses the other day, I abbreviated after verse 2, where Matthew tells us “Abraham was the father of Isaac.” After that, I simply wrote “Isaac of Jacob . . . Jacob of Judah and his brothers.” I didn’t want to type (or even cut and paste) “was the father of . . .” forty-one more times.

What Matthew does at the beginning of his gospel is not illegal or immoral, even if he is giving us some “insider information” in the very first verse. He could have begun his story by saying, “An account of the genealogy of Jesus” or even “of Jesus of Nazareth.” Instead, Matthew gets right to the point of the story he is getting ready to tell when he says, “An account of the genealogy of Jesus ***the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.***”

Jesus’ genealogy is something of a “who’s who” of God’s people between 2000 B.C. and the birth of Jesus. Maybe you’re not surprised to hear about these famous ancestors of Jesus:

* Abraham, who believed God’s promise of more descendants than there are stars in the sky. “And [Abram] believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness,” and Abraham became “Father Abraham,” the model of faithfulness and trust. (Genesis 15:6)

* Isaac, the child of the promise, who was born to Abraham and Sarah even though they were long past the child bearing and child rearing years. Isaac, who carried God’s promise forward. (Genesis 21)

* Jacob, the father of the twelve sons who gave their names to the twelve tribes of Israel. (Genesis 25)

* Jesse, the father of David, about whom the prophet Isaiah wrote, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” (Isaiah 11:1)

* David, King David, “a man after [God’s] own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14), THE king of Israel’s golden age.

* Solomon, the wisest king of all.

* Hezekiah the king, who “trusted in the LORD the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him.” (2 Kings 8:5) Hezekiah, who reformed God’s people and “held fast to the LORD.”

* Josiah, the boy king, who called God’s people back to faithfulness when the book of the law was discovered when the Temple was being restored. Josiah, of whom

it is written, “Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.” (2 Kings 23:25)

* Zerubbabel, one of the leaders when the people returned from their fifty years of exile in Babylon and helped them rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. (Ezra)

* And last but not least, there is Joseph, who is described by Matthew himself as “a righteous man.” (Matthew 1:19)

What an illustrious family tree! It’s the least we would expect to find in the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

How interesting, then, that Matthew didn’t whitewash Jesus’ family tree or try to hide the family’s dirty laundry or stash the skeletons in the closet where no one could see or read about them. Because in the same family tree we hear about:

* Judah, the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar — Tamar, who was his own daughter-in-law. (Genesis 38)

* Jacob, the father of twelve sons, yes, but also Jacob the trickster who cheated his brother, Esau, out of his birthright and blessing and lied to his own father. (Genesis 25 & 27)

* King David — yes, a man after God’s own heart, but a king who broke almost all of the Ten Commandments when he slept with one of his general’s wives, got her pregnant, and had Uriah killed to try to cover his sin. (2 Samuel 11)

* King Solomon — yes, the wisest king of all who built God’s Temple, but a king who also built and tolerated high places of worship to foreign gods and taxed his people heavily to finance his building projects. (1 Kings 11)

* Manasseh, who became king when he was twelve years old and reigned for fifty-five years (the longest reign in Judah’s history), but whose rule is summed up this way: “He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, following the abominable practices of the nations that the LORD drove out before the people of Israel.” (2 Kings 21:2)

And then there are the women — WOMEN! — in the family tree of Jesus. As if it wasn’t unusual enough for Matthew to mention these five women, consider who they were:

* Tamar, who had twins by her father-in-law, Judah, after she had shamed him by dressing like a prostitute and catching him in his lie. (Genesis 38)

* Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho, who saved the Israelite spies and, in turn, asked that her family be spared when the Israelites took Jericho. (Joshua 2)

* Ruth, who was, as they say, “a furriner.” Boaz and the other folks in Bethlehem might have said, “She’s not one of us. She’s not from around here.” But this “furriner,” this Moabitess becomes the great-grandmother of David. (Ruth)

* Then there’s “the wife of Uriah,” not even called by name in the family history (although we know her as Bathsheba), taken by King David in an adulterous affair, who became the mother of Solomon. (2 Samuel 12)

* And, of course, there is Mary — young, unmarried, pregnant, but obedient and faithful to the LORD, the mother of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. (Matthew 1:18-25)

There it is, for the whole world to see! An account of the genealogy of Jesus — warts and all, dirty laundry flapping in the wind, skeletons rattlin' in the closet, people after God's own heart, faithful and obedient characters — the Old Testament equivalent of ministers and horse thieves and kings and slaves.

Oh, just in case we didn't get his point by reading the list of "begats" in verses 2-16, Matthew neatly sums up what he has just told us: "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." (1:17)

ancestry.com advertises, "It's not just history — it's your history." Matthew 1:2-16 is not just history — it's Jesus' history. And it's not just Jesus' history — it's the history of Israel! Matthew says, "This is the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. This is the fulfillment of God's promise from the beginning, the fulfillment of God's covenant with David." The list of "begats" tells the story of God's faithfulness throughout history, God's faithfulness in and through and to the people he has called.

When I asked folks in Bible study the other day, "So, what does this list of 'begats' mean to you?" someone said, "The steadfastness of the promise." YES! In this season of Advent, we remember and hear again about God's promises — promises he has fulfilled by sending his Son, the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham — promises he has made that one day his Son will come again. Jesus' family tree — "warts and all" — reassures us that God's promises are true and that God can and will fulfill all of his promises to us, despite anything and everything we might do along the way that can threaten those promises.

This Advent, let us hear Matthew's "account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" not just as history — not even just as **his-story**, but as **our** story.

And our story as God's people continues . . .

Let us pray: God of peace, cause us to rejoice in you always, make us gentle to everyone, keep us from being anxious about anything. Help us ask you for what we need, with thanksgiving; and let your peace guard our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.