

A Advent 4 12.22.19

Matthew 1:18-25

Focus Statement: God is with us.

Well it's taken us four weeks, but we finally get an Advent reading about the birth of Jesus. Though you might have noticed, or maybe you think I stopped early or came in late, but Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus may not have all you think it should. This is not the one Linus read in Charlie Brown Christmas. Matthew doesn't have the angel appearing to Mary or the child leaping in Elizabeth's womb. Matthew doesn't have the decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. There's no angel chorus, no shepherds, no manger or lack of room at the inn. Matthew does have one thing that Luke is missing; Matthew has wise men following a star. But other than that, this is not the Christmas story you might have been expecting.

We tend to try to lump all the Gospel accounts into one cohesive narrative. Which I think really does us a disservice because each Gospel has something different they are trying to tell us about the nature of God. So I promise you'll get shepherds and angel choruses of Luke's beloved Christmas version on Christmas Eve. But for today I want to encourage you to put all that aside for a bit, and let us just dig in to the good news that Matthew has for us. Good

news that starts not at the birth of Jesus but actually forty-two generations before. So let's jump forward a few verses and begin at the beginning.

The Gospel of Matthew starts: "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..." You see how this is unfolding. Fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen from the exile to Joseph, forty-two generations of who was the father of who, was the father of who, was the father of who. This section gets left out of the lectionary because, I get it, it's kind of boring.

It's boring, but it's one of my favorite features of Matthew's Gospel because it tells us some super important things about who Jesus is. First, before it gives us this miraculous birth story of Jesus being conceived by the Holy Spirit, being the Son of God, this genealogy asserts an important truth about Jesus, that he is human. Jesus is the Messiah because he is from the promised lineage of David. God promised a Messiah would come from the root of the tree of Jesse, and we know God keeps God's promises, because God also

promised Abraham his descendants would number the stars, and, look, Abraham is in this lineage too.

So that in and of itself is cool. But here's my favorite part about Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. I pointed out the so and so is the father of so and so, and so and so is the father of so and so, and so on. But, there are four exceptions to the "father of" pattern. Four women are listed in the genealogy of Jesus; Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah. These aren't characters who come up in the greatest hits bible stories all that often, so let me give a really quick snapshot of who these women are, before I tell you why I think this is so important.

Tamar was the daughter-in-law of Judah, one of Joseph of the technicolored dreamcoat's brothers. Tamar's husband died, and as we talked about a couple months ago now, there was at the time the weird rule that if a husband died without an heir, a man's brother had to produce an heir for him. In this case, brother wasn't particularly keen on this plan, and also died. Now, there was a third brother, but seeing how this was all unfolding, Judah told Tamar, you go back to your father's house, and when the younger brother is of age, we'll come get you. After a few years Tamar realized this wasn't going anywhere,

so in order to both do right by her husband and protect herself, she took matters into her own hands. She disguised herself, seduced Judah, and became pregnant. At first he was furious, but when he found out he was the father, he admitted “she is more in the right than I.” Which makes zero sense by current standards, I get it, but at the time by this action Tamar redeemed both her deceased husband and her father-in-law. Tamar displayed righteousness, right relation with her husband and the law, in assuring an heir for him.

So that’s Tamar. Rahab’s story’s not quite as scandalous, though she was a scandal. Rahab was a self-made woman, an owner of a “house of ill-repute,” attached to no man, who hid the spies of Israel as they came to figure out how to take over Israel from the Canaanites. Rahab’s righteousness was in supporting the people of Israel.

Ruth was also a widow, a Moabite whose loyalty to her Israelite mother-in-law led her to leave her own people and travel to a foreign land. Upon arriving in Israel, she met her next-of-kin by marriage, whom she brazenly approached to request him to fulfill his ethical responsibility to her deceased husband and, like Tamar, marry her so she could have an heir for her first husband. Boaz

agreed, but there was actually a closer relative who had first “dibs” there is no less awkward way to say it, on Ruth, but when Boaz pointed out that any children would actually belong to the first husband, that man gave up his rights and Ruth and Boaz were married. Ruth was righteous in her relationship to Naomi, and righteous in her relationship to her family of marriage.

And then there’s the story so scandalous that Matthew doesn’t even name the woman, referring to her instead as “the wife of Uriah.” Uriah was a soldier in King David’s army, and while his army was in battle, David saw Uriah’s wife, wanted her, took her, and she became pregnant with David’s son. Now this would obviously have been problem for David, so first he tried to get Uriah to come back, so he would think the child was his. But Uriah was an honest man and a good commander who refused to leave his troops, so instead David made it so that Uriah was killed in battle, so he could take Uriah’s wife as his own. But here’s the piece that makes this woman such a powerhouse. She was not David’s first wife; she was his third, at the same time. Which, as an aside, when people talk about wanting to get back to the biblical view of marriage, I’m not sure which of these bad examples they’re hoping for. But anyway, and this child was not David’s first child, not by a long shot. There

were many children ahead of him in line to be heir. But this woman, despite all that has happened to her, the death of her husband, she makes it so that her kid is the one in this genealogy, her kid is the one in David's royal line, the one from whom the redemption of the world comes. In spite of David's total disregard for righteousness, the wife of Uriah raised up a son who was righteous before God.

What these stories being included in this lineage tells us is that the pedigree of Jesus is messy and complicated. These are not the sort of stories you'd expect from a Messiah, not at least if you're playing by the traditional social order. So the inclusion of these stories tell us, this is a God who isn't all that concerned with the proper social order, this is a God who is concerned with expanding what it means to be in the family tree of God's people.

Which brings us to "Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah." The reading talked about how Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, and he knew the child wasn't his, but "being a righteous man, and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." What Matthew does here is right off the bat, he makes us grapple with the question of what does it mean to be righteous. I've generally

defined righteous to mean being in right relationship with God. But righteous can also mean being right by the law. And the law said that Mary ought to be stoned for being pregnant outside of marriage and especially from someone other than her husband. And yet, after a visit from an angel—which, sure it's an angel but still, this is a lot the angel was asking Joseph to buy into—Joseph took Mary as his wife, named Jesus, and raised the boy as his own. So if righteousness meant following the law, Joseph was not righteous. Not when he planned to dismiss Mary quietly, and definitely not when he went along with this crazy-sounding story. But of course history has proven Joseph to have been righteous. Joseph was righteous just as Tamar was when she tricked Judah, just as Rahab was when she hid God's spies, just as Ruth was when she propositioned her next-of-kin, just as the wife of Uriah was when she advocated for her kid. Dear people of God, what these stories tell us is that righteousness is complicated. Righteousness doesn't always look like what the law or the world tells us is expected.

And what I love the most about this lineage is thinking about how these stories must have impacted Jesus. What would it have been like for him to grow up knowing that he was the descendant of a woman who risked it all to protect her husband's name, a self-made business woman, a loyal daughter-in-

law, and a woman who overcame unspeakable horrors? What was it like to grow up in the household of a man who put his relationship with his wife above society's expectations and a woman who took the greatest risk in answering God's call? These earliest lessons set the framework for all of Jesus' ministry, when he will reach out to heal the sick and the suffering, when he will break bread with tax collectors and sinners, and challenge those who see themselves as above reproach.

So dear people of God, here is the unique good news that Matthew has for you. Jesus the Messiah is divine. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin, this is a life that is nothing short of miraculous. But Jesus the Messiah is also totally human. And just like us, he brings with him family baggage, baby momma drama, and a whole lot of just plain weird and messed up. So this holiday season, and every other season, remember this: Righteousness, living in right relationship to God and to God's people, is messy and complicated. Just like life is messy and complicated. Each of us comes to this life with our own genesis, our own origin story, our own struggles and situations where righteousness, right relationship seemed impossible. But look, Jesus' family history, Jesus' life, the people Jesus chose to associate with throughout his ministry, those people, those stories, were messy and complicated as well.



Ours is a God who gets complicated human relationships. The way we struggle and fall short, the way we hurt each other, the way we tend to label and disabuse. And in all of this there is, there can be, righteousness. Thanks be to God. Amen.