

Lauren Calvin Cooke  
Sermon on Matthew 1:1-17  
December 18, 2022  
Northlake Church of Christ

The Christmas season has the unique ability to bring us both joy and pain. On the one hand, it's a time when we're often together with family, participating in beloved Christmas traditions and conjuring holiday spirit through Christmas decorations and cookies and familiar old carols. On the other hand, the expectation that we're *supposed* to feel as joyful as everyone around us *seems*, can highlight what isn't the way it ought to be, or the way we wish it were. Maybe this was supposed to be baby's first Christmas – and I've been there. Maybe there's tension in your marriage. Maybe you're estranged from your parents. Or your children, or your grandchildren. Maybe this is your first Christmas without someone you love. Or maybe it's the 5<sup>th</sup> or the 10<sup>th</sup> or the 20<sup>th</sup>, and it still feels just as raw. Just last Sunday, I was having lunch with several of you as we all shared some of the family tension and grief that surrounds our Christmases that doesn't make it into the Christmas card. It's the background behind the holiday façade that we often only hear if we're willing to share our own.

With that in mind, I want to start by saying that our text this morning is more than a list of names, although I should offer my heartfelt thanks, and an apology, to Mary for the pronunciations. It is the story of Jesus' own family that is filled with its own hidden tensions and griefs. And as the very first verses of Matthew's gospel, it is the way Matthew chooses to begin the story about Jesus. John's Gospel begins, "In the beginning was the Word," situating Jesus as God incarnate, transcendent, before time. Mark's Gospel jumps right in with Jesus' ministry, skipping the birth narrative altogether. But Matthew's Gospel begins by situating Jesus in his human family, showing how the Messiah was born of the same messy and complicated lineage

that we all have. It's Matthew's Christmas card photo, if you will. But like our holiday cards, there is more to this genealogy than meets the eye.

To us, it can sound like a list of unfamiliar names, a lot of unknown people. But as we read and pay attention, it comes alive with new detail. Behind every name is a richly textured story full of triumphs and failures, wins and losses, courage and cowardice, faith and faithlessness. You might have recognized a few names in this list: you probably know Abraham and David. You might know Jacob and Solomon and maybe even Josiah. But what Nahshon or Manasseh? Let me tell you about them.

Nahshon was the brother-in-law of Aaron the priest, and leader of the tribe of Judah, who helped Moses take a census of his tribe. According to rabbinic tradition, after the Israelites had left Egypt, he was the first to step into the Red Sea before the waters were parted. In faith he waded in all the way up to his head before the sea began to part. When the tabernacle was dedicated, Numbers 7 tells us that Nahshon was the first to bring an offering on behalf of his tribe, although it was the fourth tribe. In Jewish tradition, he was chosen first because he was uniquely worthy, having sanctified the name of God by his great faith at the Red Sea. It was through Nahshon that Jesus came – and what a legacy!

On the other end of the spectrum, we have King Manasseh. In the records of the kings of Israel and Judah, the first thing said about Manasseh besides the length of his reign was, "He did evil in the eyes of the Lord." The sins of Manasseh are written in detail in 1 Kings 21, but to read them all to you would mean I'd be preaching overtime and you'd be late to lunch. He undid all of his father Hezekiah's religious reforms, reintroducing polytheistic worship in the kingdom of Judah, and burned his son alive as a sacrifice to other gods. Manasseh's wickedness was so great that he is cited as the reason for the Babylonian exile. The account of his reign ends this way:

“Moreover, Manasseh shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end, besides the sin that he had caused Judah to commit, so that they did evil in the eyes of the Lord.” And it was through Manasseh that Jesus came.

Maybe you have a father like Nahshon – a man of integrity, valor, and faith. Or maybe you have a father more like Manasseh, who would willingly sacrifice his own child for his own self-interest.

That’s just two names on the list. This week, I’d encourage you to find another one you’re unfamiliar with and Google “who is \_\_\_ in the Bible?”, and jot some notes about them in the margin. And then we have the women mentioned in this genealogy. In a patriarchal lineage, women usually aren’t mentioned in the genealogies. But Matthew gives us five. For the sake of time, I’ll tell you about two.

Judah, the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar. Tamar. Ah, what a story. She married the oldest son of Judah, who died before they had children. So according to the Israelite tradition of Levirate marriage, where a man’s closest relative would marry his widow to produce an heir for the deceased, Judah gave Tamar his second son in marriage. The brother intentionally failed to fulfill his obligations to Tamar, and then he also died. Judah was afraid to give Tamar his third son, lest he also die. So he told Tamar to wait until his third son grew up. Well, the third son grew up, and Tamar gradually came to realize that Judah never intended to make good on his promise. So she took matters into her own hands. When Judah went on a journey, she disguised herself as a prostitute and stationed herself along his route, becoming pregnant by Judah, her father-in-law. When Judah realized Tamar was pregnant as a result of prostitution, he demanded that she be brought out and burned to death – until Tamar revealed that it was he who was the

father, at which point Judah at least had the humility to confess, “She is more righteous than I.” And it was through Tamar that Jesus came.

Then we have this: David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah. I wish that Matthew had used her name: Bathsheba. Because she was a person in her own right, harmed in unspeakable ways by a man’s abuse of power. But I think Matthew refers to her here as “Uriah’s wife” because he wants there to be no chance that we can forget or skip over the scandal of David’s violent treatment of Bathsheba and then of her husband Uriah. For those of you who don’t know the story, Israel’s greatest king took one of his subjects by force, and when she became pregnant, he had her husband killed in battle to cover it up. But the chronicler who wrote down the story had no desire to cover it up, and neither does Matthew in his genealogy. In the phrase “Uriah’s wife,” the sin and scandal are baked into the genealogy of Jesus. And it was through Bathsheba – not David’s legitimate wife, but Uriah’s – that Jesus came.

Maybe you have had an experience like Tamar, desperately wanting a child that the universe seems determined to keep from you. Or maybe you have had an experience like Bathsheba or even Mary, surprised and terrified by an unexpected pregnancy, not knowing how it will change the course of your life.

The inclusion of Tamar and Bathsheba’s stories highlights the ways in which this genealogy doesn’t unfold in the “typical” way with the single straight lines of an uncomplicated family tree. This has dotted lines, squiggly lines, lines that crisscross and double back. It is messy and complicated. A richly textured genealogy, indeed. Does any of this remind you of your family? In this genealogy, we’ve got sinners and saints. Adoption. Sibling rivalry. Tension and religious disagreements between parents and children. Absent fathers. Untimely deaths. Interracial and interreligious marriages. Infertility. Estrangement. Loneliness.

And finally in this genealogy, we have the character who is not a person. Did you notice it? “There are fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen generations from the exile to the Messiah.” The exile to Babylon. An event, a collective traumatic memory baked into the DNA of the people of Judah, an event so definitive of Judah’s identity that it becomes not just a part of Jesus’ story, but a defining part of Jesus’ family tree, elevated to the same status as the great patriarch Abraham and the great king David. Tim Sensing points out that both Abraham and David represent covenants and blessings, given by God, that were foundational for understanding what it meant to be an Israelite.<sup>1</sup> But the exile, the trauma, is just as formative as the blessings. Matthew’s Christmas card photo is not set against a cozy fireplace or a Christmas tree, but a backdrop of war and devastation.

Many years ago now, in late September, my aunt’s house burned. As they gradually worked through the rubble, seeing what family photos and heirlooms they could salvage, I remember my cousin jokingly suggesting that their Christmas card that year should be a picture of all of them in front of their burned house. I don’t think they ended up taking his suggestion. But for many of us, there is a hidden background to our family photos that speaks of disappointment, devastation, and loss. Sometimes in the photo itself, and sometimes a few generations back. For some of us, a traumatic event looms so large in the family history that it almost takes on the identity of a person, an invisible and unwelcome presence that changes everything. The kind of event where you speak of “before” and “after” because it so radically changes the shape and the identity of your family. Maybe it’s the kind of event that leaves a rift you aren’t sure can be healed. Or the kind of event that leaves an empty chair at your table.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tim Sensing, “Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Gospels Matthew* vol. 1, p 7.

What are those defining events and memories that are constantly present before you at Christmas, that show up uninvited to your holiday celebration? What is the tension or grief or loss that is the hidden backdrop to your holiday photo? What is it that brings tears to your eyes as you participate in the traditions that are supposed to bring joy? God, we name these silently and hold them up before you.

During this season of Advent, we talk about preparing the way for Jesus. We sing “let Earth receive her king, let every heart prepare him room,” and “be born in us today.” I don’t know about you, but most years, I don’t feel like I’m the best host for Jesus or the best heart for him to be born in, because I don’t have it all together. I don’t feel prepared to receive a King. Can we really ask Jesus – God incarnate – to be born into our imperfect lives, our imperfect families, our imperfect world? How do we prepare ourselves to receive a King when we are such a mess? This list of names, Matthew’s genealogy, reminds us that maybe preparing ourselves for the birth of Christ is less about having everything in order, and more about being open to the surprising, gracious, miraculous Advent of a King who comes whether we feel prepared or not. When we sing “be born in us today,” we are not asking anything of Jesus that Jesus has not already done. He has been born into conflict and trauma. He has been born into scandal and sin. He has been born into heartache and hurt. He has been born into messy lives, a messy family, a messy and complicated and broken and beautiful world.

We don’t celebrate the coming of a Savior who is above showing up to our mess. We celebrate a Savior who was born into the midst of it, and whose love has the ability to redeem, heal, and make whole. To bring beauty from the brokenness. To sanctify the sinners, to find the lost, to unify the separated, to heal the broken. To knit together the names and stories and photos

of all those in God's own family: those who are invited and those who are left out. Those who are remembered and those who are forgotten. Those who are named and those who are not.

This doesn't mean that the family will be together this Christmas, or that those wounds will be healed this year. But one day, they will be. And *that* is what we celebrate in the coming of Christ. We don't celebrate the perfection of our celebration. We celebrate the hope of redemption.

In Matthew, the Christmas story begins not with the narrative of baby Jesus in the manger, but with the narrative of the messy, broken, complicated family into which he was born. And so the genealogy that establishes the identity of the Messiah also becomes an invitation to us to embrace the dotted and squiggly lines in our family tree, to err on the side of inclusion in our family photo, to tell the stories of hurt and hope that brought us here. It is an invitation to laugh *and* grieve, and to trust that in the midst of that, Christ is present with us. It becomes an invitation to us to know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that our family, that this family, is precisely the kind of family into which Christ chooses – into which Christ delights – to be born.