

A Deeper Story?

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Matthew 1:1-17

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Life is full of surprises and patterns – those things that we’d never expect and those things that happen over and over again. (Whether we want them to or not!) Genealogies are full of surprises and patterns – if one delves in to the stories behind the names. Any of you who have given a DNA sample to “ancestry.com” or “23 and Me” know this well! Even now, with the popularity of these genetic services and the international TV hit, *Who Do You Think You Are?* the TEGO effect still happens with genealogies. TEGO or “The Eyes Glaze Over” effect (an official Bible Commentary term) is common when reading and especially when listening to long lists of one’s genealogy – even if that genealogy belongs to Jesus (2013 Sensing 7).

But Jesus’ family tree is anything but boring, and its unusual and odd inclusions and omissions tell us not only Jesus’ ancestors and lineage, but who he is – namely, the Messiah, God incarnate, God with us – and what he is about – inclusion, mercy, grace and love. That’s the whole point.

To get this point, we must start by acknowledging that, on a factual level, Matthew’s genealogy for Jesus doesn’t work. We know that Jesus was not Joseph’s biological son, as we heard last week in the scripture lesson: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 1: 18).

Given this, it is a surprise that there is a genealogy for Jesus at all. This surprise, this unlikely genealogy, encourages us to go beyond the names on the list and see God’s truth in the story – God’s Truth about the complexity and contradictions of life, God’s Truth found in spiritual birth, not just physical birth.

The key to Matthew’s entire gospel is the Truth that Jesus is the Messiah. To prove his case, Matthew shows how God’s action in history is fulfilled through Jesus. History that began with Jesus’ first ancestor, Abraham, 42 generations before Jesus’ birth, is completed with Jesus’ coming to earth. It is a history built on a covenantal relationship of trust and love between God and God’s people, first through Abraham and then through David.

Like Abraham, Jesus is an Israelite; like David, Jesus is King. Abraham and David are key anchors in Jesus’ ancestry. The third anchor, though, is not on the list but Matthew includes it in the genealogy, recognizing its foundational place in the Israelites’ and in Jesus’ story. Take a look at the genealogy list in your bulletin. If you have a pen or pencil, (there are some in the pews, if you need one) please draw a line in between Johoiachin and Shealtiel – the second row from the right, in the middle. This line indicates a crucial event in the life of the Israelites that changed their relationship with God forever. It was their exile to Babylon. Matthew writes: “Josiah was the father of Jechoniah and his brothers. This was at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel” (1: 11-12).

Even in the joy of the Messiah's birth, the Israelites' suffering and wilderness time is named and remembered as a time that challenged their relationship with God and changed their relationship with the Divine One forever. It was a time that led to God's new way of journeying with God's people – Jesus/Emmanuel/God with us.

Another surprise is that this genealogy is not an exclusively patrilineal list. The women (excluding Mary) listed are *not* the ones commonly named in Biblical genealogies. These women, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah (aka Bathsheba) – three of whom have lewd sexual encounters and one with a foreigner – are not the usual female Biblical heroines like Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel. But yet there they are, forever a part of Jesus' genealogy, his genesis, his beginning. God used them for good. These women are just a few of the imperfect, common people chosen by God as participants in Jesus' sacred story. A couple more are Jacob, who bullied his brother Esau and stole his birthright blessing, and King David, who had an affair with Bathsheba, had Bathsheba's husband Uriah killed, and then went on to have numerous wives.

There is a pattern of far-from-perfect people being essential in God's sacred story of the incarnation – God with us, God as us – showing that Jesus was fully divine and fully human. This lineage also has a pattern of inclusion. Men and women, sinners and outcasts fill it, despite their flaws and, because God/Jesus is all about love, grace and mercy, everyone is included.

Inclusion – this is what we hope for from our family, isn't it? To be included in the celebrations, invited to the party, sent the Christmas card, asked to participate in the white elephant gift exchange. This time of year, more than any other, the gift of family is deeply cherished and, often, deeply missed.

It is possible to get through the days and weeks during the year pushing aside the hurt experienced from the estranged sister, the recent, or not so recent, death of a parent or spouse, the loneliness felt when everyone has family plans except you. But during the last six weeks of the year, this pushing aside becomes incredibly difficult, as everywhere you look, on TV, in shop windows, on social media and even much of what you hear on the radio is family oriented in one way or another. When everyone seems to belong with someone, the fact that you don't can be heartbreaking. Family is truly a gift, not a given.

Retired Pastor and 215th Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Rev. Susan R. Andrews tells the story of Sonia. She writes: "Sonia was obsessed by her past. Adopted by an abusive family as an infant, she always felt like a stranger to herself. When she gave birth to a daughter and held the infant in her arms, Sonia simply fell apart. Stunned by the realization that someone had held her thirty years earlier and then rejected her, Sonia was filled with a grief and a self-loathing that shaped her adult life. After an exhaustive search through phone books, hospital records, and birth registries, Sonia discovered a clue that led her to the place where she had been born. She began pursuing her birth parents with a passion that infuriated them. They simply did not want to be found. Slowly, Sonia gave up her search, finding her only solace in the promises of her faith. She found comfort in the knowledge that she—like all of us—is adopted, welcomed, wanted in the family of God, and that Jesus cherishes her as a sister" (2013 4).

Friends, this is how Jesus feels about each of us! Beginning with his unlikely ancestry of surprises and surprising patterns, Jesus assures us that we come not just from our birth

parents, but from all the people whose lives are woven with ours – people who have been encouragers, comforters, protectors and challengers. Our lives, like the life of Jesus, are multicolored and multi-layered wonders. We are cherished members of his family. We are wanted and loved. It is from this belonging that we can claim and cling to hope – hope for a better tomorrow, for a better year, for a time in which together we can forge ahead into new adventures with courage instead of fear, optimism instead of skepticism, enthusiasm rather than apathy.

Life is full of surprises and patterns – those things that we'd never expect and those things that happen over and over again (whether we want them to or not). This new year, 2019, will no doubt be full of surprises and patterns, particularly when it comes to our families, both our faith families and our biological ones. As the year unfolds, may Jesus' lineage remind you of two things: First – our past births us but it does not control us. Second – we, and all the other misfits and sinners, are adopted into God's future. We are new creatures in Christ. The past is finished and gone, the new has come. Thanks be to God and Happy New Year! Amen.

Work Cited

- Andrews, Susan R. 2013. "Matthew 1: 1-17: Pastoral Perspective" in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew Volume 1 Chapters 1-13*. Louisville: John Knox Press. pp. 2,4,6.
- Sensing, Timothy R. 2013. "Matthew 1: 1-17: Homiletical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew Volume 1 Chapters 1-13*. Louisville: John Knox Press. pp. 3,5,7.