

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
First Sunday of Advent
Sunday, November 27, 2022
10am

Texts: Isaiah 2:1-5 (NRSVUE) & Matthew 1:1-17 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

My middle name is Loren. I normally spell it for people because the spelling is unusual for a female: L-O-R-E-N. It was given to me in honor of my grandfather and in memory of his father, my great-grandfather, whose name was Loren. He died before I was born, but every time I share my middle name, I feel connected to him and his story. I feel connected to a generation of my family that I mostly know through just photos and names.

Dr. Christine Hong writes that “Names are the seeded hope of one generation planted in another.”¹ We are the embodied hope of previous generations, and we live in hope for the generations that are to come. Which is why it is fitting on this First Sunday of Advent as we wait in hope for Christ that we begin our Advent series with Matthew’s genealogy.

It is tempting to skip over this part of the Christmas story. It can be boring to read and the names difficult to pronounce. We know the stories behind some of the names, but most draw only a whisper of recognition. But Matthew’s genealogy is more than a list of names. It is a story in and of itself. The opening words to Matthew’s Gospel translate literally as “book of genesis.” “Genesis” is a Greek word that means “generations” – but not generations in the sense of a person’s ancestry. Instead, the word implies an ongoing story. Matthew’s genealogy is a summary of a great cosmic story: God’s story of salvation. This story was working itself out from the beginning of creation down through the stories of forty-two generations of people until, at last, hope was born in a manger in Bethlehem. Matthew’s genealogy is a litany of hope that points us to Jesus.

¹ “Commentary on Matthew 1:1-17” by Dr. Christine J. Hong. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.

Here is something important to know about this genealogy: It is not historically accurate. There are several hundred years' worth of names missing from the list. Some of the people listed are not actually in Jesus' family line. When you compare Matthew's genealogy with Luke's, there are all kinds of discrepancies. And Matthew chooses to trace Jesus' lineage through Joseph, which is odd because Joseph is not Jesus' biological father. If Matthew was interested in reconstructing an accurate line of descent, he would trace Jesus' ancestry through Mary.

If you were taught to read the Bible literally or as a historical text, these facts might be a little unsettling. Doubters point to Matthew's genealogy as proof that Scripture cannot be trusted. But this objection ignores the point of Matthew's genealogy. He is not interested in constructing a historically accurate bloodline for Jesus. In fact, very few ancient genealogies were written as such. When we trace *our* genealogies, we do so based on DNA and historical records; we want to understand our roots, who and where we come from. But ancient genealogies did not have DNA or Ancestry.com. They were written for a rhetorical purpose: To prove an individual's claim to power.

Matthew's genealogy is making a theological point about Jesus. So, the question we ought to be asking ourselves is: What does Matthew want us to know about who Jesus is?

[pause]

Our artwork for this Sunday is a digital painting by the Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman entitled "Genealogy of Christ." Of all the figures listed in Matthew's genealogy, Rev. Pittman chose to paint the only five women who are named: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. I would like to read to you from her artist's statement. She writes:

"In this image, I chose to represent Christ using a rose at the center of the composition...All of the women are looking at the viewer and holding objects to represent the fact that they took their life and survival into their own hands. They were catalysts who propelled the lineage forward. In the bottom left, Tamar holds her father-in-law's insignia, which represents how she assumes his role as the leader of the tribe of Judah and continues its lineage. Moving counterclockwise, Rahab holds the red cord which she lowered to ensure the safety of her family

*after supplying Israelite spies enough information to achieve victory in Jericho. Next, Ruth holds the wheat that she gleaned from the field. She knows that she must marry again in order to be protected, and so she takes initiative with Boaz. Bathsheba's name isn't even mentioned in Christ's genealogy; she is referred to as the "wife of Uriah." She withstands abuse from King David, survives the murder of her husband, and ensures that her son Solomon takes the throne...Finally, there is Mary who looks adoringly at the rose which represents her son. Here she holds the love and pride of a beautiful lineage that leads to the birth of her son, the Messiah."*²

Ancient genealogies are typically traced through the father's line, excluding women. So, Matthew's decision to include these five women in his genealogy is unusual. Except for Mary, these women are Gentiles – outsiders – in Israel. Tamar was a Canaanite; Rahab and Ruth were from Moab; Bathsheba married a Hittite, which made her a Gentile by Jewish law. And even though Mary came from good Jewish blood, her pregnancy was a scandal that alienated her from her community.

Each of these women's stories are marked by struggle, loss, and trauma. But their stories are also the catalysts for pivotal moments in God's story of salvation, moments where God broke the mold of law and tradition to pave the way for Jesus. Through their grit and determination and faithfulness, these women helped prepare the way for the LORD. Their stories are outside the norm of what we expect from heralds of salvation – they are outsiders, outcasts, outrageous for their time and place. But God seems to have a flair for the outrageous and unanticipated. After all, no one anticipated that the Messiah would be born in a barn to an unwed teenage mother and that the chief witnesses would be farm animals and shepherds. No one anticipated that the Messiah would spend his life eating with sinners and welcoming outcasts. No one anticipated that the Messiah would be executed on a cross alongside two common criminals.

Repeatedly – from his birth, through his life and death, and even at his resurrection – Jesus makes room for people and their stories, especially the parts of their stories that are irregular, outrageous, and overlooked. Matthew's genealogy and his entire Gospel teach us this about Jesus' identity: Jesus is inclusive.

² Artist's statement: "Genealogy of Christ" by Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.

I don't mean inclusive as a progressive buzzword. I mean it in the Gospel sense: God's plan of salvation is to draw all of creation to Godself and restore it to wholeness. Is this not Isaiah's vision: The nations streaming to God's Mountain, every person welcome in the household of God, the earth renewed, regenerated?

Matthew includes four Gentile women in Jesus' genealogy as a sign that in Jesus the whole world will be reconciled to God. Jesus is the fulfillment of ancient Israel's hopes, but he is also the fulfillment of her purpose: To be a light to the nations and bring salvation to the ends of the earth (Isa 49:6). No longer is God's salvation limited to a specific group of people; God is reaching out to everyone, everywhere. This is why Matthew begins his genealogy by calling Jesus "the son of Abraham" (v. 1). God promised to make of Abraham's descendants a great nation through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:3). Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise – the promise that all people belong to God.

Truly the beauty of Matthew's genealogy is found in its diversity, but even more so in its ordinariness. God chooses to work through the nitty, gritty of ordinary human beings – great and small, known and unknown – to accomplish salvation. Matthew's genealogy gives us hope not just because it prepares the way for Jesus. It gives us hope because if God chose to work through all those people, perhaps God chooses to work through us, too. Perhaps God blesses our stories, as well, even the pieces we think are unholy or unacceptable – the pieces of shame and sadness, suffering and trauma, confusion and doubt – even the boring, mundane, everyday pieces. Every piece of our stories is sacred because they are part of God's story. We bring ourselves and our stories to God's Mountain, trusting that our stories are part of something bigger and better and more beautiful than we could ever imagine.

In this season of division and isolation, the church can and ought to be a foretaste of God's Mountain. We can and ought to be a place where every person's story finds room, every person's story finds a place to belong. Can we be that kind of church, where every story is welcomed and honored and blessed? We do not always do this well. But it is my deep conviction that what the world needs most is hope that there is a better way of being human. When we make room for stories that challenge us, make us uncomfortable, change the way we look at the world, cause us to grow in compassion, empathy, understanding, and grace –

when we make room for these stories, we become a church where people can bring their full humanity and find the belonging and blessing that God promises.

On this First Sunday of Advent, we receive again Isaiah's ancient prophecy of inclusion and the testimony of Matthew's genealogy that Jesus is the fulfillment of that great promise. As we journey through these days of waiting and expectation, lighting candles against the darkness, nurturing our hope in the promise of a new creation – we are invited again into God's salvation story. This story belongs to all generations. This story belongs to us.

Amen.