

Christmas Eve
The Surprise of Christmas
December 24, 2010

Video – “Nativity Scene”
Monologue – “Overwhelmed”
Feature – Overwhelm Me

Carols – O Holy Night / Hark the Herald / Go Tell
Video – “Social Networking Christmas”
Feature – “Strange Way to Save the World”

I suppose it *was* a strange way for God to enter into the world. I mean, if you or I were in charge of deciding where and how the one called “Messiah” would be born, it’s probably the least likely scenario we would come up with. If *we* were in charge, most of us try to figure out how this very special baby could have the best of everything: at the very least, we’d arrange ...

- a warm and secure shelter instead of a stable;
- soft, clean linens instead of “swaddling clothes” (otherwise known as “rags”)
- a cradle instead of a feeding trough for farm animals.
- And, considering the spiritual significance of this newborn, we’d probably try to have at least a few members of the religious establishment in attendance instead of a bunch of guys who run around chasing sheep all day.

But God did not arrange things like most of us would arrange things ... which is why one of the great surprises of Christmas is how Jesus came to this world. And we could spend hours talking about that but even *more* surprising, I think, than how Jesus came *to* us ... is *who* he came *from*. And I’m not talking about the fact that Jesus came from a miraculous union between the Spirit of God and the Virgin Mary, though that, too, is very surprising. What I mean is ... well, let me just show you.

When you open the very first book of New Testament (which is the story of Jesus and his followers), Matthew – Matthew who was with Jesus while he walked on the earth – Matthew doesn't start with the *birth* of Jesus. Instead, he starts way before then with something that even the most dedicated Bible scholars are tempted to skip over ... because it’s kind of boring and hard to read.

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham ... Matthew 1:1 (NIV)

... Matthew begins ... and then he goes on to list over 40 of the ancestors in Jesus’ family tree.

Now, you have to ask yourself: why would a guy who is about to tell the most amazing *story* of the most amazing

person in human history start with something like that – something so bland and mundane?¹

The answer that question, you have to understand that Matthew was writing to men and women who were predominantly Jewish. And he knew that if he was going to tell them that Jesus was the Messiah – the long awaited Savior who was to come and rescue Israel – he knew that every one of his readers would be thinking, “OK, what you’re telling us about this Jesus of Nazareth guy is all well and good, but is he related to David – King David – from the Old Testament?” They would ask that because every Jew knew from Old Testament prophecy that the Messiah was supposed to come from the family line of David.

So, Matthew starts out with a genealogy to make it very clear that, even though Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit, he is in the line of David *because Joseph – his adoptive father – is a direct descendant of David*. In fact, if the Romans were not occupying Israel, Joseph would have a rightful claim to the throne and Jesus as his oldest son, would also have that right.

But, there is something very surprising – odd, even – about the way Matthew constructs his list of ancestors, especially when it’s compared to other genealogies of that era. To understand why I say that, you need to understand that historians – who study these kinds of things in great detail – have observed that, in other genealogies of ancient royalty, *anyone in the family tree who might be considered embarrassing in any way to the king is simply left off the list*.

That’s because the kings and emperors *who commissioned and employed the biographers* who wrote the genealogies went to great lengths to make sure that their family history included no criminals or traitors or anyone with a shady past. Those kinds of people might have been in the family, but their names were not put on the official list.

But ... in Matthew’s genealogy – and this is amazing – Matthew, it seems, actually *goes out of his way* to let *everyone know* that the family tree of Jesus included some of “those people” – people who would have been left off of any other list of any other person with a claim to a throne.

“Those People”

Let me show you what I mean. Matthew writes ...

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham ...

Abraham was the father of Isaac.

Isaac was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah

“And, by the way,” Matthew adds, “don’t forget that ...”

(their mother was Tamar).

Now, all the Jews who were reading this knew the story of Tamar, that she was a foreigner; that she was a widow;

and that at a very low point in her life, she had pretended to be a prostitute in order to trick her father-in-law, Judah, into getting her pregnant!

Wow. Why would Matthew include her in the list? I mean, he really didn't have to. He could have stopped with Judah and Perez and Zerah. It's almost like he was going out of his way to point out that Tamar was related to Jesus the Messiah.

Then he continues:

*Perez was the father of Hezron.
Hezron was the father of Ram.
Ram was the father of Amminadab.
Amminadab was the father of Nahshon.
Nahshon was the father of Salmon.
Salmon was the father of Boaz*

“Oh, and, by the way,” Matthew adds, “don't forget that ...”

(his mother was Rahab).

And every Jew who read this would have immediately remembered her nickname. They didn't call her “Rahab the housewife” or “Rahab the woman of purity.” It was “Rahab the prostitute.”

And Rahab, just like Tamar, was a foreigner – something it would seem you would want to downplay. But Matthew says “no, let's pause in this recounting of the family tree that leads up to the birth of the Messiah and think about Rahab.”

Then he picks up the genealogy again:

*Boaz was the father of Obed
(and don't forget - his mother was Ruth)*

She wasn't a prostitute, but she was a foreigner.

*Obed was the father of Jesse.
Jesse was the father of King David.
David was the father of Solomon*

Finally, King David. If you were Jewish and looking for the Messiah, this is the important part: *Jesus is connected to King David!*

But Matthew couldn't just leave it at that. I mean, he could have just said, “David was the father of Solomon” and moved on.

But no, instead, he has to add:

(his mother [referring to Solomon] was the widow of Uriah). Matthew 1:1-6 [NLT]

Now, that's odd. Matthew doesn't name Solomon's mother. But he didn't have to because everyone knew that Solomon's mother; the widow of Uriah was ... Bathsheba. And everyone knew the story of David and Bathsheba was one of adultery, cover-up and David's murder of Bathsheba's husband Uriah.

And again, it's almost like Matthew wants to stop and put a big red flag beside that sad story and say, "*look who else* shows up in Jesus' family. *Look who else* is in the family line of the special one, the one sent from God."

Reasons

But, why? Why not just talk about all the nice folks Jesus was related to like they do in all the other ancient genealogies? Why does Matthew keep doing this?

I think there are a couple reasons.

I think Matthew wants it very clear – right from the outset – that God is a god of the real world and a God of real people ... and real people aren't perfect.

I think he wants it very clear that God knew what he was getting into when he became a man in the person of Jesus. And so we don't need to pretend about who we are with him. We don't have to pretend that we have it all together.

And I think that's good news because a lot of us think we need to. A lot of us think that a relationship with God is about playing up our strengths and playing down our weaknesses and failures. A lot of people think they need to approach God with a list of all the good things they've done and say, "hey God what do you think of this list? Check out the 29 good things I do in my life. I know I'm not perfect, but I'm certainly better than a lot of folks. I work hard, I pay taxes and I go to church. I try to be a good parent and I keep at least 8 or 9 of the 10 commandments most of the time and I do this and that ..." and so on.

But, I think Matthew wanted to point out before he got into the story of Jesus and his life – before he got to the part that we call "Christmas" – that this story was not going to be about lists; our attempts to put our best foot forward. "No," Matthew says, "look at some of the people who are in Jesus' family. A lot of them don't have a list to stand on. They don't have a list to wave in front of God. They don't have a best foot."

Secondly, I think Matthew wants everybody to understand that it was God who included all these less-than-perfect people – prostitutes, liars, murderers and thieves.

I think Matthew was saying "those kinds of people being included is the *point of the story*."

Some of you here tonight need to know that. You've convinced yourself that the God of the Bible doesn't want to have anything to do with you. You're thinking "I've done too much bad in my life. I've been too far away from God."

But, friends, this dry-as-a-bone genealogy tells us that nothing could be further from the truth. Matthew exposes the dirt in the family tree of Jesus because he wants us to know that as much as God hates sin, He loves sinners

equally as much. He wants us to know that even though our sin is worse than we would ever believe, God's love for us is better than we can ever imagine. And he wants us to know that God saves sinners while they are *still* sinners, not after they get their act together.

Finally, I think Matthew also wants it clear right from the outset that God is a god not just of the "insiders" but also a god of the "outsiders."

In the world of the ancient middle east, women were often thought of as property. In the Hebrew part of that world, those not born of Jewish descent – "Gentiles" they were called – were considered to be dogs. That's why it was common practice for a devout Jewish man to begin his day with a prayer of "God thank-you for not making me a woman or Gentile."

And yet, Matthew goes out of his way to say "look at all the women – *non-Hebrew* women – that God included in the line of the Messiah" because Matthew wanted it clear that God is just as interested in those considered to be outsiders as He is those who are on the inside.

In fact, after this surprising revelation concerning Jesus' ancestry, Matthew goes on to tell the story of his surprising birth and *then* the story of his surprising life – surprising in that Jesus spends so much time with the people who are considered to be outsiders ... people like Matthew, who himself was an outsider.

Matthew was a Jewish man who worked for the Romans collecting taxes from the Jewish people. And tax collectors were considered to be traitors at best; irredeemable at worst. But when Matthew met Jesus, he discovered something very surprising: that God loved him, too and wanted a relationship with him as much as anybody.

And I think this might be the strongest point of all this evening because a lot of people who show up on Christmas Eve tend to feel like outsiders to the faith.

You don't have to stay an outsider. If you're in this community, you are welcome to join up with those of us here at NHCC. We're just a bunch of regular people. And we're not about pretending that we're anything different. We just try to live in the truth and grace of Jesus.

And with that thought, I want to bring this brief message to a close.

Prayer of salvation – you came for all of us. We believe; we receive and we rejoice in that.

Carol – Silent Night

CLOSING COMMENTS (Rick)

ENDNOTES

¹ The message is inspired by "Second Chance Christmas At Velma's Diner - Who Let Them In?" by Dean Angell, December 6 & 7, 2003 found at www.lakeviewchurch.com/learning/sermons03/christmas-wholetthem.html