

The Rev. Dr. Sandy Kerner

So, as you can tell, my name is not Charlie Holt. No matter what your bulletin says. And I'm not standing out there either. I'm up here some day, maybe.

I'm Sandy Kerner, if I haven't met you yet. And if I haven't met you yet, please stop and introduce yourself to me on the way out. And I'm doing my best to remember names. But I wish you all would wear a nametag. It would really help me a lot.

And then tell me on the nametag who's related to who. I'll tell you about that in a minute. I had Thanksgiving dinner this year with Ben and Carolyn Jones. They were kind enough to invite me because I couldn't find a pot or pan in my house. I had just literally moved there the week before, and so I was helpless.

And so, they took kindness on me. And I went out to their house for dinner. And as clergy do, we get together. And of course we talk all about you, right? Because that's what we do. Now, we talked a little shop. We talked about ourselves. We talked about our lives and how threads wove through our lives so beautifully.

We knew so many people together. And so I said to them.

Like, tell me something about Saint Mark's. Yes. I said, tell me, what advice would you give a new priest on the staff of Saint Mark's? I said, where are the landmines? So I don't step on them. And, you know, it took them a while to find something, so that's good on you. But they said, wait a minute. You know, it's really good.

There's so many people here who are related. They're related by blood, they're related by kinship, they're just related by their long roots here and by long histories of going to school together and growing up together in this place. Be careful, they said. Your rector, Charlie Holt, was a little more blunt with me. He said, don't talk bad about anybody here, because you never know how they're connected.

So I will follow your advice, Charlie. For sure. Good. And as a rector, I served many small churches where that was true, for sure. I always wish that somebody would draw out the whole map on a piece of paper so I could see who how the family trees are related to one another. That would be a real kindness for a new priest or a new staff person.

But I'll do my best.

Our evangelist this year, Matthew, Matthew's gospel is where we continue to read from during this this year, this church year, Matthew takes the time to introduce us to a particular family. And in the verses just before our gospel reading today, starting with Matthew chapter one verse one, we hear this whole litany of people, all the ancestors of Jesus that come down all the way to Joseph's line and to Mary.

And so Matthew lays it all out for us in groups of 14. It's 14 generations from Abraham down to David, King David, and it's another 14 generations from David, down to when the chosen people were exiled and deported to Babylon. And then there was another 14 generations of when they came back, and from there and they until Jesus was born.

So Matthew gives us the whole family story. He does lay it all out, all the good, the bad and the ugly is all there. So there's some real characters in these stories, you know, it's complicated. The story begins in Matthew one the story of the beginning, the origin, the advent, the Genesis, the genealogy of Jesus Christ of Jesus, who is the Son of David and the son of Abraham.

Isn't that true? In our lives too? We are the son of somebody. We are the daughter of somebody, no matter how old we are. And we refer to people that way in our family lines. He names the generations. He starts with Abraham and he says, Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was the father of Jacob. And so on.

Down the line. These characters are interesting. If you go back and you read those names, if you can even pronounce them, some of them are difficult. It almost reads like a symphony overture. Or the symphony picks up little threads of the songs that will be played and displayed during

their concert. And you can hear those sounds, those threads of those families as you look at the names, if you know the stories, there are some great people in there.

There are also some real scoundrels in that list. Very interesting. And some are a little mixture of both. It depends. But if you know, you know. And so David is a great example of that, a saint in many ways, but also a sinner.

And we go back to Abraham, who had two sons. Remember, the first son born was not of Sarah, his wife. It was of her servant girl Hagar, and his name was Ishmael. And Sarah was bitterly jealous of Hagar because she bore Abraham his son. And so she sent Hagar and Ishmael packing at one point just to get them out of the way, and then finally she conceives and bears a son, Isaac.

And Isaac is the one that Abraham takes to sacrifice because he believes God's calling him to offer up his son, his only son, the heir of the promise to God. It's a prefiguring of what God will do for us in Jesus when he offers us his only son in sacrifice, and so on down the line. And then you look at Isaac's sons, Esau and Jacob.

There's sibling rivalry between them that the Bible certainly talks about. And then there's Jacob's sons, who plot to kill one of their younger brothers, Joseph. It's just fascinating to look at these characters and just say, wow, what a mess. You know what a dysfunctional family. And yet God's unpredictable graciousness extends all the way down the line to both saints and sinners.

If you look at that list of names, you will see liars. You will see rivers, you will see people who are idolaters, who betray one another, those who kill others, those who've committed adultery and rape. They're all in their Jesus lying. His story contains all manner of men and women, even the women named in this genealogy, and the fact that there's a few women named is significant, as it is that these women have complicated pasts, shall we say, like Rahab the prostitute.

But she's in there. She's a she's an ancestor of Jesus. And the line comes all the way down to Mary, whose story is also rather complicated as we heard today in our reading, because she's given in marriage to Joseph. It's a legal marriage. At this point, betrothal meant it was a legal marriage. And yet here she turns up pregnant.

What's that about? Before she even consummated the marriage with her husband, Joseph. So it seems that there are landmines. Even in Jesus family story. It's comforting, isn't it? Jesus is born of a woman, fully human, the son of David, through Joseph's line, but also fully divine. The fullness of the Godhead. Colossians says, bodily dwells in him. It's as if God, condescending, descending, intervening into the world that he created into a particular family at a particular time.

And so God comes right down into our mess and is the one who knew no sin in this family line, and who became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God. We just sang that in the song. What a scandal! Theologians call it the scandal of particularity. It's the choice of God to intervene into the world through one particular family, that of Abraham, to bless the world through a particular people, his chosen people, to reveal himself to them and through them to the world, that they might be a blessing.

And then to come as one of us, Emmanuel, with God, with us at a particular time in history, in a particular place, Palestine, and through a particular mostly obscure backwoods family, through circumstances that were anything but normal. And then there's this added scandal of an essentially married woman pregnant, not with her husband's child, but who's in our gospel passage for today, which comes right after this genealogy.

Joseph is the one who is left wondering, how can this be? Who is the father of this child? It's not me. I can only imagine that his heart was broken at that time. Either Mary has been unfaithful to him with another, or maybe somebody took advantage of her, but nevertheless, he loves her even though he feels betrayed. And I can imagine he felt spurned.

But being a compassionate and righteous man, as Scripture tells us, in any case, he does not want to shame her, so he decides to divorce her to dismiss her quietly, not to cause even more scandal, and rather than assert his rights as her legal husband and have her punished or

shunned, his plan is to give her a divorce that would enable her to marry another and raise up this child in some without so much humiliation.

Because after all, where they live is Nazareth. It's not Ortega, but it's Nazareth. It's a small village, and everybody will know and remember the story, because memories of scandal linger long, and they would pay the cost. And so into that mess, God comes, God intervenes. An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream, says Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for the child that's conceived within her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. Matthew reminds his hearers that the prophet Isaiah has already foretold this birth. We heard that Scripture reading today they shall call him Emmanuel, the with us God. And Joseph, who is a righteous man, obeys the Lord's word to him.

He receives Mary as his wife, and he claims this child legally as his own, because he names him, and he names them what the angel said to name him Jesus. It's such an interesting name. The name of Jesus. It derives from the Hebrew, from the verb yashar, and it literally means to save, to deliver, to set free, to forgive, to heal.

It has all those shades of meaning. And Jesus name, Yeshua comes from that verb. He is the one who saves. He is the one who delivers. He is the one who sets free and the one who heals. The literal meaning of Yeshua. I was doing a retreat. I would have you all just balled up in a little tiny tight ball like this.

It's tight as you can get. I won't make you do that today. Get like this. That is the tight, constricted, narrow space. That space that so many live in. But yashar to save, to heal, to deliver, to set free means to bring out from a tight, constricted space to a wide open and spacious place of light. That's what Jesus name means.

And that's what he does for us. That's who he is. He opens us up to receive the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. He breaks and releases chains that bind us. Chains of unforgiveness, helps us to forgive, gives us grace. To forgive ourselves, to forgive others. In fact,

God seems to have an attraction, even a fondness for entering and intervening in those dark and hurting places and opening up new life through the scandal of the cross, through the price that he paid, through his own blood shed.

For us, this is the with us God.

God intervened in Abraham's family line, saving and healing and delivering and setting free, releasing through the birth, death, resurrection, life of Jesus Christ. And then by sending the Holy Spirit, this blessed intervention. And here me. This is the take away line. This blessed intervention is now for every family, every person, every community. That's what our God does for us in Jesus Christ.

We who are buried with Christ in our baptism are raised to new life, and we can be set free from generations of sin and sickness and spiritual death from the bondage of addiction, from anxiety that wraps tentacles around us, from isolating loneliness and estrangement. We can be released from patterns of thought and habits that keep us entrapped in loops that we can't break out of on our own.

That's what Jesus does in his name.

Beloved, is this the intervention that you long for? For yourself? For your family? We just saying, oh come on, come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel. We are all captive Israel. And the Lord is setting us free. That's his purpose. As we hear Jesus own words, as we celebrate the Eucharist today and the prayer of consecration. This is my blood shed for you, poured out for you, for the forgiveness of sins.

And as I raise the chalice, when I celebrate communion, and I say those words under my breath, I'm also saying, Lord, your blood be upon us and upon our families, and come and set us free to know you, to know your love, and to follow you. That's the kind of healing and setting free. That's available for us through his blood.

We call this kind of healing generational healing. God intervening in the midst of brokenness in our lineage and setting captives free, and God blessing the gifts and legacies passed down in families, and praying that they be multiplied to our children and our children's children. That's generational healing. We can do that because we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ.

And through that there is a great undoing of brokenness available for us in our families. We have a new bloodline. And that comes down from Jesus own blood, grafting us into a new lineage where one day everything sad will come untrue. As Tolkien says, I want to close with a story. Maybe you know this beloved person, Father Marshall Lowell.

Anybody remember Marshall, a few a few of you do. Marshall was a character. If you didn't know him, he had a twinkle in his eye. He loved to tell jokes. He loved to laugh. And I can still see his shoulders going up and down as he laughed at his own jokes. He was a great guy, wonderful man. He served at Saint Margaret's in Hibernia for a while.

He also served at Saint Catherine's. Marshall had a family history, a pattern of untimely death for each man in depending on the generation. So in one generation a man in that generation would die at 42, the next generation coming up, the man would die at 65, 42, 65. 42. 65. It went on like that for generations. Our friend Marshall was 41, and the person before him in the generation who died was 65.

He was getting a little nervous. And so at 41, he asked people to pray for him. He said, I don't want to die at 42. I want to continue living. Can you pray for me? So that this pattern, this curse, my family is broken? And so prayer ministers came together, prayed for him. They celebrated the Eucharist for his family.

They prayed the blood of Jesus upon him and upon his family lines. I'm happy to report that Marshall lived another almost 20 years after that. He was also a chain smoker, so he did die early, but nevertheless, he is a good man and he lived well beyond his expiration date. And during those years is when he engaged in some of his most fruitful ministry.

Joseph's obedience to God's direction was also key to saving of his family. Not only the prayers for healing, but then obeying whatever God said. And so he took Mary as his wife and claimed Jesus as his legal son by naming him the name above all names. Our obedience to walking in the ways of God is also key to wholeness in our lives and in our family's life, because once we're set free from those besetting sins and patterns, we now can choose by the grace of God, to walk in light and to follow as he leads.

So I ask you today, beloved, and I ask myself, what are you most longing for in this season? As we prepare for the birth of Jesus? What kind of healing do you long to see in yourself, in your family? What kind of intervention from God do you need God entering into your story and into your family's story, especially in this time as families gather together and there's always holes and hurts as we come together.

And for those of us who have no family.

So I invite you today to think about that, to pray about it, and to bring that longing to Jesus as you come and receive Holy Communion today, and as you put your hands out to receive the body of Christ, and as you take the chalice in your hand to drink his blood. Ask the Lord to set you free, to heal, to come and intervene in whatever mess, whatever brokenness, whatever pain you're experiencing.

And believe that he does that and he will ask him for what you most need and long for today. And so, Lord Jesus, we do. We come to you this day and ask in faith that you would come and intervene in our family's lives. Lord Jesus, come. Come in. He'll come and set free. That's who you are. Come and forgive or come and release us.

Places where we're stuck. And let us know that you are Emmanuel, the God who is with us to save us and to set us free. This we pray Jesus, in your mighty, beautiful name. Amen.