

The Rev. Dr. Sandy Kerner

So, as you might surmise, I am not Charlie Holt. In fact, I'm standing up here so I know I'm not Charlie Holt. I'm not down there. I'm Sandy Kerner. And if I haven't met you yet, I'd love to meet you after this service and shake your hand and try to learn your name as best I can. I keep asking, so keep telling me your names.

That would be helpful for me. It's good to be here with you today on this fourth Sunday in Advent.

I was invited to Thanksgiving dinner. I just moved here. I couldn't even find a pot or a pan in my house. And so Ben and Carolyn Jones took mercy on me and invited me over for dinner, which was great. And as clergy, you know, we had a good time. We talked about a lot of things, a lot of people in common and stories.

And then of course, we talk about our craft. We talk shop, too. So while I had their attention and while I was with them, I decided to ask the question that was burning in my heart. What are the landmines at Saint Mark's Church? Tell me what not to tread on so I don't blow something up. And they thought, and they thought for quite a while.

They were puzzling over that one, which is good for you all. And then they said, you know, just be sure people are related here. Everybody's related by blood, by kinship, by their long roots here. They went to school together. They've known each other forever. Be careful.

Charlie Holt was even more blunt when I asked him that question. He said, don't talk bad about anybody here ever. You never know how they are connected. Yes, sir. I'll do my best. And as a rector, I've served some small churches. And I know that that's true in a small church. I just didn't expect it so much here.

And I always wished coming into a new situation, that somebody would just map out the families for me so that I could figure out who was connected to whom and, and how all that

worked. That would be such a real kindness for a new priest or a new staff member. Our evangelist of the gospel for this year, for a year as Matthew, as Charlie talked about before, and Matthew takes the time to introduce us to a particular family and all the cast of characters that are in that family.

It starts with Matthew one verse one and goes right before this reading we had today, and this family tree is laid out for Jesus. And there's a particular family that God comes to in this story. The ancestors of Jesus. This book begins with laying out that genealogy. And so Matthew one says, the story of the beginning, or the origin or the advent or the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

It's of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, who is the son of Abraham. So Matthew takes us all the way back to Abraham, takes us down 14 generations from Abraham is the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, all the way down to King David, which is 14 generations, the greatest king in Israel. And then from the time of King David to when God's chosen people were deported and exiled into Babylon, he tells us it's another 14 generations.

And he lays out all the cast of characters and the names, how they're related. And then there's another 14 more generations that come from when they return from exile all the way to the birth of Jesus. And if you know the names, you know, they read like the overture to a symphony or you're beginning to hear bits and pieces of the music that you will hear throughout the symphony, these stories of people, they capture our minds and hearts.

Some are saints, some are scoundrels, some are sinners. Some are a mixture of both. And yet here they are. They are the family line of Jesus. Even the heroes in this story are tragically flawed in some way. Take David for example. David is the King of Israel, but he also has a few problems, doesn't he? If you've read your Bible, you know some of those stories.

And we start way back with Abraham, who had two sons. Remember, Ishmael was the oldest son whose mother was Hagar, not Sarah, because she couldn't conceive a child. But Ishmael was never the favored one. It wasn't until Isaac finally came along the child of promise. And then God invites Abraham to sacrifice his son in obedience to God's call.

Really, it's a prefiguring of the sacrifice of Jesus, God's only son. And yet the son. Isaac is spared, and Isaac goes on to have children, Esau and Jacob. And there's sibling rivalry between them. And then Jacob's sons plot to kill one of the younger sons, Joseph, because they're jealous of him, and this mixed up, dysfunctional family tree continues all the way down.

And it's interesting that Joseph, the favored one, is not the one who's in the genealogy for Jesus. It's Judah, one of the older brothers. But this is a complicated family tree, and God's unpredictable graciousness extends all the way down to saints and sinners in this family tree. If you know your Bible stories, you know there are liars in that family tree.

There are carnivores, there are betrayers, idolaters, those who are immoral, those who killed others, those who raped and committed adultery. They're all there. The story of Jesus contains all manner of men and women, saints and sinners. Even women are named in this genealogy. That's unusual in Scripture. There's several women, but each one of those has a complicated history and somewhat of a past all the way coming down to Mary.

Jesus, born of Mary, a nobody from the backwoods of Galilee. Her situation's complicated too. We hear that in today's reading. Don't wait. In the gospel reading, she's pregnant before she's given in marriage fully to the man who is her legal husband, Joseph. Before their marriage was even consummated, she turns up pregnant. So it seems that there are landmines even in the genealogy of Jesus our Savior.

Jesus, born of a woman, fully human and yet also divine, son of David in Joseph's line and yet also God's Son. The fullness of God comes to dwell in him bodily. Scripture tells us it's as if God is condescending, coming down, intervening into the world so that we might know his saving grace, his righteousness. The one who knew no sin became sin for us, and entered into all of our messiness, that we might become the righteousness of God.

Brothers and sisters, what a scandal this is in our scriptures. I'm amazed it's all included in there. But it is. It's real people and God comes in real time. The theologians call it the scandal of particularity, the choice of God to intervene in the world, the world that he created through one particular family, that of Abraham, to bless the world through a particular people, his chosen

people, to reveal himself to them through the world, to the world, and through the world to come as one of us, to come as Emmanuel, the God who is with us, the with us for us.

God, coming at a particular time in history to a particular place in Palestine through a particularly mostly obscure backwoods family, through circumstances that were anything but normal. And then then the added scandal that we hear today of essentially a 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 left wondering, how can this be? Who is the father of this child? It's not me. So today we hear Joseph's story and I couldn't help but thinking. Joseph's heart must have been broken. Either Mary has been unfaithful to him with another, or someone took advantage of her. Nevertheless, he loves her even though he feels betrayed and I can imagine, spurned in some way.

And so being compassionate and righteous man is. Our scriptures say today he decides to divorce her, to dismiss her quietly, not to cause even more scandal, rather than assert his rights as her legal husband and have her punished or shunned, his plan is to give her a divorce, which would enable her then to marry another someday, and to raise this child that she's carrying with less humiliation.

After all, Nazareth is a really small village, and you know how people talk. So they would have been suffering and paying the cost for a long time for this. And yet into that mess, God comes. God intervenes. An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream. Saint Joseph, son of David. Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for the child 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 us that the prophet Isaiah has already foretold this, which we heard in our first reading today, that the virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel, which means God with us, or literally in Hebrew, the with us.

God. And Joseph is a righteous man, and so he obeys the Lord's word, and he receives Mary as his wife, and claims this child legally because he names him, which is what a father would do for a child, and he names him the name the angel gave him. Jesus. It's so interesting. This name Jesus. It derives from a Hebrew verb yashar, which means yes to save.

But being a good Hebrew word, it has lots of nuances of meaning, so it can mean to save. It can mean to heal, deliver, set free, forgive. All of those things are embodied in that word, yashar. And that's the word we get Yeshua from. Or Jesus name. It literally means if you think about a picture to go from a tight, dark cornered place and to be brought up into a wide and spacious and light place, that's what that verb means.

Literally. And in Jesus, God breaks into tight corner dark places and blows them wide open and lets light and air in and gives us new freedom, saves us from sin and sickness and death, and opens us up to receive the love of God that is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who's given us, releases and breaks.

The chains that bind us to unforgiveness, gives us grace to forgive, to release people, to let go, and to know that we are forgiven. In fact, God seems to have an attraction, even a fondness for entering it and intervening in 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 for us, the God who is with us.

And God didn't intervene in Abraham's family line, saving and healing and delivering and setting free through the birth, the life, the death, the resurrection, the ascension of Jesus Christ, and then sending the Holy Spirit. This blessed intervention. This is the thing I want you to hear today more than anything else. This blessed intervention of God coming among us is now for every person, every family line, every community.

Jesus enters into our messy, broken, suffering, hurting lives and families, bringing shalom, bringing wholeness, bringing forgiveness, bringing healing, bringing rescue. We who are buried with Christ in our baptism and raised to new life, can be set free from generations of sin and sickness and spiritual death can be set free from the bondage of addiction, can be set free from anxiety that wraps its tentacles around us.

We can be set free from isolating loneliness and estrangement, and release from patterns of thought and habits that keep us entrapped in loops that we can't break out of on our own.

Beloved, is this the kind of intervention that you long for? For yourself? For your family? As we just sang this morning. Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel, we are captive Israel when he comes to ransom us, to set us free.

And as we hear today again Jesus own words in the prayer of consecration, this is my blood shed for you, poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.

As I raise the chalice, when I celebrate Holy Communion, I always pray under my breath. Lord, your blood be upon us and upon our families. Come and set us free to know your love and to follow you. We call this kind of healing generational healing. God intervening right into the midst of brokenness and setting captives free. God blessing the gifts and legacies too, that come down through the generations to us, and praying that they multiply in our children and our children's children because we are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there's a great undoing of brokenness available for us and for our families.

We have a new bloodline that comes down from Jesus own blood grafts us into a new lineage, into a new family, where one day everything sad will come untrue. As Tolkien says. To illustrate this, I want to tell you a story. I don't know how many of you remember Father Marshall Lowell. Anybody remember Marshall? A few, few heads nodding.

Yes, a character, wasn't he? If you knew him, you knew those eyes twinkling, some crazy story he was about to tell, some joke, his shoulders going like this as he laughed at his own jokes and stories. Chain smoking the whole time he was a character. Marshall was rector over at Saint Margaret's in Hibernia back in the day, and then he was also at Saint Catherine's and in Marshall's family.

There was a pattern in his family line of untimely death. And so one generation, a man would die at age 42, the next generation another man would die at 65, 42, 65, and so on. It just kept

happening. I don't know if it was a curse or just a pattern or what it was, but Marshall had just turned 41, and he heard about this prayer of generational healing prayer.

And so he was desperate. He came and found some prayer ministers who prayed with him to cut him free from this family line of brokenness, of untimely death. And they celebrated the Eucharist. And when they lifted the chalice, they prayed that God's blood would be upon him and his family and set him free from that pattern. I'm pleased to report that Marshall lived another 20 years after that did pretty good, and those were some of the most fruitful years of his ministry as well.

God's in the business of redeeming and of doing that kind of thing in our lives, just as he did in the life of Abraham's family. Line. Joseph's obedience was also key to the saving of his family. He took Mary as his wife. He claimed Jesus as his legal son, and his obedience led them to safety when it became unsafe for the child and for the mother and they had to go to Egypt for a time.

But Joseph listened to what the spirit told him, to what the angels revealed to him, and followed God's leading in that we to once were free from these besetting sins and patterns. We can now choose, by the grace of God, to walk in the light and to follow him as he leads. And so I ask you, brothers and sisters, today, what are you most longing for in this season as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, what kind of healing do you long for in you, in your family line?

What kind of intervention do you need God entering into your story, your particular life? Your family's story? Especially in this time as our families gather together and we feel the holes and the hurts that are there. And for those of us who have no family, we pray for God to be there to with us. And so bring that longing today as you come for Holy Communion, and as you put your hands out to receive the body of Jesus Christ, and as you reach to take the chalice and receive his blood, pray that his blood, his body is good medicine for the brokenness in your life and in your family's life.

Because that's what God loves to do. He named his son Yeshua for a reason, the one who saves and sets free and delivers and heals. He's here for you today. To do that work in you and in your family. And so, Lord, we ask you to do that work in us today. Would you prompt us to pray so that you will come and break all of that brokenness away from us, and give us new life through

your blood, and raise us up to newness of life in this season, when you come among us again as Emmanuel, God with us.

Amen.