



From the Pulpit: January 7, 2024
Baptism of the Lord Sunday

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Matthew 1:1–17

Jesus' Grandmothers, I: A Royal but Checkered Pedigree

In this season of Epiphany this year at Kenilworth Union Church, Katie, Christine, Squire, and I are preaching this rather eccentric sermon series. We're calling it *Jesus' Grandmothers*. Matthew begins to tell his story of his carpenter from Nazareth by painting Jesus' genealogy, he lists 42 grandfathers of Jesus and five grandmothers. We will look at the grandmothers in Jesus' genealogy from the Gospel of Matthew:

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah... Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus, who is called the Messiah.

Well, I hope your holiday was filled with joy and recreation. Perhaps you received apt and timeless Christmas gifts, abandoned the office or the classroom for a few days, went high to ski or south to sun, sent and received a stack of Christmas cards the size of *War and Peace*, and reconnected with family near and far. And perhaps you're glad that all the relatives have gone back to where they came from.

Family can be a mixed and dubious blessing, right? A friend of mine was making small talk in the office, and she asked her colleague "So you are spending Christmas with relatives?" and the colleague replied, No I'd rather spend it with loved ones.

"Family can be a mixed and dubious blessing, right?"

After Christmas shopping, a family of active little toddlers went for lunch at a MacDonald's, and one child was sobbing because he didn't get the toy he wanted, and another dumped his Coke all over his sister's hamburger because she was stealing his fries, and

then the smallest child fell off his chair to the floor. Mom got up in a huff, returned the child roughly to his perch, and said to all of them, sit down, shut up, and eat your Happy Meals.¹

And all of that wouldn't be so bad were it not for the ones you've never met, the ancestors gone long before you arrived: the colorful great aunt who becomes the vivid star of every family legend by sailing through four or five husbands, the great-grandfather who made the family fortune with mythic intelligence or lost it with dazzling ineptitude. Because it's not just the nuclear family that determines who we are, where we live, and what we become. It's our ancestors, distant or near. It's our pedigree. Your personal history predates your birth and survives your demise, because you will turn up one day, for good or for ill, in some distant descendant's branching family tree.

¹Jennifer Smith, *Reader's Digest*, February, 2003, p 95.

The Jews know this. They know where they came from. The pages of the Bible are littered with genealogical lists, and I do think littered is the right word, don't you think? Have you ever tried to read the Bible straight through from cover to cover? And were you simply flummoxed in the effort by one of these interminable lists of begats, that strange Jacobean verb 'begat'?

Still we can learn something. In his Gospel Matthew wants to tell us who this eccentric carpenter from Nazareth really is and where he came from, and he chooses to begin his story by reminding us that Jesus' story predates his birth even as it will survive his death. He wants to tell us where Jesus came from, and where Jesus came from in part says Matthew, is the 42 heroes and scoundrels in his royal but checkered pedigree.

Three things I'd like us to notice about Matthew's genealogy for Jesus. Can you handle a three-point sermon? First, Matthew's genealogy for Jesus is good theology but bad history. It can't be literally accurate. Luke gives us Jesus' genealogy too but it's completely different from Matthew's. Matthew gives us 42 ancestors of Jesus and Luke gives us 77, but only 17 names are common to both lists. Matthew and Luke can't even agree on who Jesus' grandfather was, one generation back. So one of them, Matthew or Luke, got it all wrong. Or maybe both.

Not only that, but none of these ancestors Matthew lists are really Jesus' ancestors, because Matthew traces the lineage of Jesus through Joseph, who, if the rest of Matthew's story is to be believed, was not a blood relative of Jesus. None of Joseph's genes are in Jesus' blood. Why then does Matthew bother at all to tell us the names of 42 people who aren't Jesus' blood relatives?

Doesn't Matthew give us Jesus' royal but checkered pedigree not so much to tell us about his **physical** DNA but his **narrative** DNA? Not whose blood is literally running through his veins but the stories that told him who he was?

Do you think he knew the stories in this list, Abraham's faith and Isaac's obedience and David's courage and Ruth's compassion? Isn't that how we form character in our children, not so much by sharing our DNA as by sharing our stories, telling them who their ancestors were, who we are, and who we expect them to be? The present linking the past to the future? We aren't who we are because of the blood in our veins but because of the stories in our hearts, those narratives that teach us

how life is to be lived, those heroes we're to copy if we want to live an honorable life.

So that's Point #1: Matthew's genealogy is theological, not historical. Point #2: the stealthy grace by which God redeems what is broken and puts the ignoble to work on noble purposes, quite against the ignoble's intention. There are some real scoundrels in here; it's a basket of deplorables. It's not the eldest and ablest and holiest, but it's Jacob the Deceiver and David the Adulterer and Ruth the Gentile, and Rahab

the prostitute and several really wicked and dastardly Jewish kings and let's not forget about the very last in the line: Mary, the unwed teenaged mother.

Perhaps part of Matthew's point in giving us this royal but checkered pedigree is to show us that God can use anything, anything at all, to bring about God's purposes in God's story on God's green earth. History happens at this coincidence, this coherence, this meeting, of twisted human connivance and stealthy divine providence, so that despite all the turns and meanderings and dead ends of human history, God comes up with Jesus, the most perfect life that's ever been lived. God uses what is mixed and fixes what is broken and heals what is sick and points the lost in the right direction.

So Point #1: good theology, bad history. Point #2: the stealthy providence of God which will us anything and anyone to accomplish God's purposes. Point #3: patriarchal prejudice. There are 42 men on Matthew's list and five women, which means that 37 of Jesus' grandmothers are missing from this pedigree.

"Isn't that how we form character in our children, not so much by sharing our DNA as by sharing our stories"

That was the way with Jewish genealogy, of course; lineage was traced from father to son and the female part of the equation was just shunted aside, as if they had nothing to do with making this whole history happen.

It's a prejudice the Church somehow inherited from that patriarchal culture. The Church has been leaving women out for 2,000 years. "Western Christianity" says Karen Armstrong, "never fully recovered from this neurotic misogyny."² This is especially true of the Mother Church, but we Protestants haven't been so great either.

Which is kind of strange because we didn't get this neurotic misogyny from Jesus himself. He always treated women with extraordinary respect, and this is something we tend not to see because it is so subtle and so much in the background of the Gospel accounts of his life. The Gospel references to Jesus' relationships with women are almost incidental, and so unpolemical that we sometimes neglect to notice that it is, as Helmut Thielicke puts it, an extraordinary protest against the status quo³

He looked them in the eye. He met them face to face. He treated them as equals. They must have been astonished. It must have been completely new to their experience. I doubt they'd ever met a man quite like him. Maybe that's why women were first at his cradle and last at his cross. The story of Jesus' life in the Gospels is bookended by faithful women. Don't you think it might have been Jesus himself who came up with the old joke: What did God say after he made Adam? I can do better than this.

²Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (New York: Knopf, 1993) p. 124.

³Helmut Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex*, trans. John W. Doberstein (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1964), 9.

God can use anything and anyone to accomplish God's purposes, anything and anyone at all. Did you know that D-Day was supposed to happen on June 5, 1944? General Eisenhower had all 160,000 troops, 12,000 planes, and 7,000 boats all cranked up to go on the fifth. But then this postal clerk at Blacksod Point on Ireland's far northwestern coast sends in this weather report.

“God can use
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Back then postal clerks were also responsible for collecting weather data, and in all of Europe, the weather came first to Ireland's northwest coast. It's at Blacksod Point that you can first predict the wind and waves coming from the west. "It's going to storm" she said. "Are you sure?" they said. "I'm sure" she said. "OK then" they said. "We'll wait a day." June 6, 1944.

That postal clerk was 21 years old and brand new to the job on June 5, 1944. Historians give her credit for helping to win World War II, the hinge of the twentieth century. Her name was Maureen Sweeney. She died on December 17 at the age of 100.⁴ God can use anything and anyone to accomplish God's purposes.

Foreshadowed then in Matthew's little pedigree are these Jesus-themes of the stealthy grace by which God redeems the broken and puts the ignoble to work on noble purposes, this inclusion of the excluded, this enfranchisement of the disenfranchised, this honoring of the dishonorable. I hope you'll see this royal but checkered pedigree as a microcosm of God's whole vivid drama, which despite all the twists, and turns, and dead-ends of human connivance, always ends up in God's splendid intention.

⁴Alex Traub, "Maureen Sweeney, Whose Weather Report Saved D-Day, Dies at 100," *The New York Times*, January 5, 2024.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Holy God, you draw us in.
You set your spirit in our midst.
You guide us, by starlight,
to the place where we are,
where we can be wrapped in your presence.

As our world is wrapped in the blue glow of snow,
we feel the lingering Christmas story grow.
Mary and Joseph, in the manger,
laboring to care for the smallest infant,
love-made-known,
some mystery yet unfolding
of the incarnation and your presence
with us in a new way.

Let us live in the lineage of this little family,
who make holy the simple work of living.
Let us tune our hearts to the song of hope
that shines most bright
in these weary snowy days
at the beginning of the year.

Bless the children on winter break,
the cocoon of home and holiday
still warm before the ache of school day's return.

Bless the teenagers, mornings stretched until noon,
shaking sleep just as lunch begins.

Bless the college students,
ready to leave home for their new home on campus
where freedom and learning live large.

Bless those navigating new careers,
new cities, new relationships.

Bless those planning marriages and uniting families.

Bless the ones seeking to welcome new babies.

Bless the ones in the thicket of parenting,

one day at a time,
dreaming of Christmases to come.

Bless the ones who are holding gratitude in their hearts,
a kind of mystery unfolding in this life
that might never have been dreamed.

Bless the ones carrying new diagnosis
and worry and decisions,
finding some through-line to hope.

Bless the ones grieving,
deep sorrow, a kind of yearning.

Bless the ones who walk through darkness,
whether in war or disaster, invisible trouble or false dawn.

Protect. Heal. Strengthen. Bring wholeness.
Let our human heart “continue to dream
of a state of wholeness,
a place where everything comes together,
where loss will be made good,
where blindness will transform into vision,
where damage will be made whole...
where we show compassion or kindness to one another”

Awaken us, O God. And bless us.
Here in this sacred place, awaken us.
Feed our spirit.
For in you, we rejoice.
In you, our anxieties fall from our shoulders.
In you, peace will come.
In faith and in hope,
we lift up our hearts to God using the prayer
Jesus teaches us, saying: Our Father... Amen.

**The quote is from John O'Donohue, To Bless the Space Between Us*

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