

A Trip to the Rag and Bone Shop

Matthew 1: 1-11

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We all like to recall illustrious ancestors. People who inspire us. People who make us feel we matter. But how far do you have to reach in your family history to find a scoundrel or a misfit, a quirkster or someone who just couldn't make the grade? There are people in every family everyone knows but no one talks about. It's an easy reach for all of us. And of course the longer we live, the more we come to realize that no heroes were without flaws. And no scoundrels were without virtues, or at least a story that explains some of what undid them. From the blue-blood to the riff-raff, we are a motley crew.

In his later years, the famous author William B. Yeats struggled with writer's block. Seeking to get reconnected to the source of writing, he realized he needed to let down a ladder into the story of his life. He needed to reach down into both the history of the people that shaped him and the unique history of his own soul. So he coined one of his most famous phrases. Yeats knew he needed to visit "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart."¹ A rag and bone shop is an old phrase for a junk store. Where people purchase for next to nothing what others have considered to be disposable. Things break and rot and we get rid of them, though someone else might find he could get a few more miles from that bare tread, and a few more wears out of that tattered coat. For Yeats, the heart itself is a foul rag and bone shop. There's a lot of junk down in there. Junk I inherited and junk I created. And out of that trash, material can be found. Dirty straw can be spun into gold.

Every advent, we anticipate all over again the birth of the Son of God in our midst. We re-tell the story. We tell it to find hope. We want to feel again the hope in the original arrival of Jesus. We want to feel hope for the future that the Jesus who came to us once will come again to set all things right. We want to know in a new way why it matters that God got birthed into a manger. The eternal Son of God made a trip to "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart." He invites us to join him there. To remember and not forget where we came from. To discover what he can make out of the raw material of all we have been and done.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Matthew's list of the genealogy of Jesus. He wants us to know that Jesus had a family bloodline; he was a real person, and his credentials to be our Lord are impressive. He was a descendant of Abraham

to whom the promise first came, as were all natural Jews. Jesus also came from a royal line. The great kings David and Solomon were his ancestors, and so Jesus stood in the stream of prophecies that said a Messiah would come from that house.

But he also came from a line of foreigners and adulterers, people of violence and failure. Let's consider four of the women and four of the men Matthew names. Consider whether you would have mentioned them in your genealogy.

Tamar married the grandson of the great patriarch Jacob. But Genesis tells us that her husband was wicked and he died. So the next brother married her. That was the law of redemption. If your brother died, you married his wife and had children so your brother would live on through them. The next brother did marry Tamar, but he declined to create children. He died too. They did not give Tamar the third brother for fear she was like a black widow spider, a woman who puts her mates to death. The family failed to fulfill the practice of redemption. So Tamar hatched a scheme. Dressing as a temple prostitute she seduced her father-in-law and thereby conceived twins (Gen. 38). Incest, an unmarried mother, and a patriarch with dubious morality came early on in Jesus' line.

The *Rahab* mentioned in the genealogy was a prostitute in the city of Jericho. As the Hebrews were encamped outside the Promised Land, they sent spies inside the walls of Jericho to get a report. Rahab hid the men from Jericho soldiers, even letting them down from her window on a scarlet rope. Though she was a Gentile with a disgraceful profession, she believed in the LORD I Am of Israel, and asked to be spared when the invasion occurred (Josh 2). Hebrews 11 recalls Rahab as a woman of great faith (Heb. 11).

Ruth is also recalled as a woman of ardent love. She was a native of Moab, an ancient enemy of Israel. Yet she was devoted to her Hebrew mother-in-law. After both women were widowed, Ruth followed Naomi back to Israel where she became the wife of Boaz and the great-grandmother of King David.

The woman listed as Uriah's wife was of course the beautiful *Bathsheba*. David, in a fit of lust, took her as his own, and then had Uriah her husband slain (2 Sam 11). It was the beginning of all David's troubles. Murder, betrayal, foreigners, and prostitution all fit into the ancestry of Jesus. Why would Matthew want to remind us of that?

Of the many kings listed, let's look at just a few Matthew highlights.

- There's *Joram* (aka Jehoram, 2 Chronicles 21). After the strong rule of his father, when he rose to power, he had all his brothers slain with the sword. He erected altars to pagan gods, and the Scriptures tell us that he led the people of Jerusalem into spiritual whoredom. So Elijah the prophet told him that in return, the LORD would visit a plague upon Joram's children and he would die with his bowels spilling out. And so he did.
- Two generations later, King *Ahaz* even desecrated the temple and nailed up the doors to the house of the LORD (2 Chron. 28).
- On the other hand, there's *Hezekiah*, who trusted the Lord so completely that we're told there was no king like him before or after (2 Kings 18: 5). He reopened the Temple and reorganized the priesthood. By his prayers the nation was spared from the Assyrian invasion, and in his faith, he received miraculous healing. Hezekiah ruled over a period of peace and prosperity in the power of the Spirit. But then, near the end of his life, he just wilted spiritually. The prophet warned Hezekiah of exile to come, that his own sons would be made eunuchs. But Hezekiah thought, "Oh well, at least there will be peace in my time" (Is. 39:8). As long as he was personally comfortable, he no longer cared to make a better future.
- His son *Manasseh*, also listed in Jesus' ancestry was one of the all-time worst kings. He rebuilt the pagan altars, even placing altars to the stars within the temple courts. Manasseh sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced sorcery and led his people into shameful idolatry (2 Kings 21: 9). Things got so bad and the Word of the Lord was so neglected, that the Scriptures were actually lost. The people forgot their heritage.

All of these people composed the rag and bone shop of human history that was passed down to Jesus. Matthew tells us that the Son of God entered fully into the life we know and live in this twisted, battered world. He could have kept his lineage pure, but he came into the world to empty himself as he fully entered our lost and forsaken condition. He took hold of our broken humanity. As Calvin said, Jesus did not "refuse the outrage in his own descent."² He took it all as his own. Incest, rape, murder, prostitution, sorcery, child sacrifice, gross idolatry, excess in wealth, pride, ego, theft, violence of all types-- He came into the world with the weight of that heritage upon him. He turned aside from none of it.

How can we grasp the depth of this good news? Perhaps by turning to another modern poet. Across five decades Bruce Springsteen has moved millions with his passionate songs about the rag and bone shop of the human heart. He knows how to speak our yearning and how to utter our deep hopes. For a rock and roller, his words are unusually suffused with spirituality. On a recent album,

Springsteen dug deep into American folk song roots. One song is like an extension of the great spiritual, “People Get Ready, There’s a Train A ‘coming.” Bruce imagines a great train coming down the tracks to gather in whoever will get aboard and take them to the land of hopes and dreams for which we yearn. The music feels like a train rumbling towards us. A soulful voice calls out like a conductor, “I’m riding this train. Oh don’t you want to get on board?”

Then Bruce comes in,
Well, big wheels roll through fields where sunlight streams
Oh, meet me in a land of hope and dreams.

Well, this train carries saints and sinners
This train carries losers and winners
This train carries whores and gamblers
This train carries lost souls

I said, this train, dreams will not be thwarted
This train, faith will be rewarded
This train, hear the steel wheels singing
This train, bells of freedom ringing

I said, this train carries broken-hearted
This train, thieves and sweet souls departed
This train carries fools and kings, oh
This train, all aboard, this train.³

With this set-up, Springsteen then riffs on the old folk song:

People get ready.
You don’t need no ticket.
You just get on board.
You just thank the Lord.

There’s a train coming to pick up any one who is willing to stop staying stuck where they are. Anyone willing to put aside pride and admit, “I need to get out!” Anyone yearning to be taken into a new life. It’s a Messiah song. It’s an Advent song, and its roots, whether he knew it or not, sink right into Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus.

There's a savior coming. He's not going around the bad parts of town. He's coming through to pick us up. He's going to stop at the foul rag and bone shop of the heart. He'll come through your history and through your present with hope for the future, "All aboard! This train is coming through. And there's room for you."

This is news for just the kind of people who may have lost hope that God would ever care for them again. This is the call for all those:

Who have been abandoned by those who should have cared.
Who have been eaten up and consumed by the ravenous.
Who have been used and disposed of.

Who married wrong,
Who took matters into their own hands and made a botch of it.
Whose beauty undid them, whose schemes unraveled them,
Who saw and took more than they should have,
Who drove their children too hard and too far,
Whose own dreams destroyed those of others.
Who settled for comfort now and failed to act,
Who took a soft path and left the wreckage to the next generation.
Who hesitated and pulled back from Christ to go with the flow.
Who defied God's laws and cultivated disorder.
Who were born on the wrong side of the tracks.
Who got written out of every story.
Who believed the lie that they would never be enough for anyone or anything.
Who cannot get the stain and stink off their hands.

This is the story for muggles and mudbloods, half-castes and half-breeds, wastrels and rascals. The eternal Son of God has stepped into the outrage of our descent. He has visited the rag and bone shop of the human heart. And he bought the lot. He bought the trash to make it his treasure. He took our muddied bloodlines to give us his pure, cleansing blood. He gathers the misfits to make us a royal priesthood in his service. He welcomes the misbegotten to make us his heirs, heirs of eternal life. He fully, completely enters what we are in order to give us all that he is.

The train is coming down the track. And there's a meal service on board. The Son of God himself is serving a royal feast. You don't need no money. But you do need to be willing to trade. Release the sin in your blood: what has been done to you and what you have done and are doing. Receive his blood in the cup of

communion. Release your self-reliance, your body of work on which you mistakenly rely. Receive his body, his health-giving flesh, in the bread of this communion. Christ Jesus even now visits the rag and bone shop of your heart to gather you to himself. His train is coming to take you back to his royal palace. All aboard!

¹ William B. Yeats, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” from *The Poems of W. B. Yeats: A New Edition*, edited by Richard J. Finneran. Copyright 1933 by Macmillan Publishing Company.

² John Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, (Eerdman’s) p. 59.

³ Bruce Springsteen, “Land of Hope and Dreams” from *Wrecking Ball*, 2012.