

Hidden Figures: Genealogy of Jesus in Matthew (Advent 2)
Matthew 1:1-17
December 8, 2019
First Presbyterian, Luling

Last week, we began Advent by lighting the candle of Hope and by beginning a sermon series about Hidden Figures, the people of the Christmas stories who are behind the scenes, who usually aren't in the spotlight, but are nevertheless important and crucial to the Christmas story. John the Baptist understood his ministry as preparing the way for the Messiah, and though he was not the most appealing preacher you've ever heard, his message of repentance and his willingness to question the religious authorities made him a crucial forerunner to Jesus and Jesus's ministry.

This week's group of people are far less well known than John the Baptist. I'm willing to wager that you've not heard of most of the people named in today's passage from Matthew, if you were even able to listen to all of those names without your mind wandering off somewhere else. Mind wandering is forgiven on long lists of unpronounceable names. It's ok. These really are the hidden figures of Christmas, probably the most hidden, most unnoticed, most overlooked people we'll talk about. Yet without any one of them, Jesus would not have been Jesus.

First of all, let's talk about why Matthew would even include a genealogy like this in his gospel. It's not exactly riveting reading, as we've established. Not even any drama, like John the Baptist yelling "you brood of vipers!" Luke also includes a genealogy. Mark does not, nor does John. For Matthew and Luke, then, including a family tree was an important way to place Jesus in a real time in history, with a real family, and a real background. It's a way of proclaiming the truth of the incarnation, that Jesus really is God-with-us, Immanuel as the Isaiah passage reminds us. It's a way of saying that Jesus really was a real person, a real human being.

There are genealogies all over the Bible, to trace the families of the Bible, the kings, to make sure everyone is in their place and we all know who we're talking about and how they're related to those other folks. Some of the genealogies contradict each other, or follow different branches as most important, or gloss over indiscretions. Jesus's genealogy in Matthew is different from the genealogy that is listed in Luke, particularly in the last third of it, from King David through to Joseph. Joseph even has different fathers, according to Luke and Matthew. Matthew makes some adjustments and takes some poetic license in a few places, to make his number scheme of fourteen generations, come out just right. These sorts of adjustments and contradictions and disagreements tend to bug us. After all, we have ancestry.com at our fingertips. Our families tend to have written records in old family Bibles. We want our family trees to be accurate. But Matthew was making a different point. And it didn't seem to bother him, and Luke's discrepancies didn't seem to bother Luke, and the first readers and hearers of the Gospel didn't seem to be bothered either. So maybe we can set aside our desire for agreement and accuracy and listen to what Matthew is telling us.

For Matthew in particular, it is important that Jesus's Jewish background be highlighted. Matthew quotes the Old Testament more than any other Gospel, so scholars think he was writing to a Jewish audience who had become followers of Jesus. That Jesus was Jewish, that Jesus was a descendant of King David, that Jesus was part of the group of God's chosen people:

that was all important to Matthew. And this is where Matthew's genealogy diverges from Luke's, it was important to Matthew that Jesus come from King Solomon's branch of the family tree. Solomon was widely regarded as the most successful and most admired king of the united Israel, kind of the glory days of the nation if you will. Jesus was rooted and grounded in this family line, stretching back to kings and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus's story began when the story of God's chosen people of Israel began. He wasn't just parachuting in as some stranger. He was one of them, and had been one of them.

Who is in this family tree? Well, much like my family tree and much like your family tree, there are some good folks and some relatives who made some mistakes and some other relatives who got caught in unfortunate circumstances and maybe even some relatives that we pretend do not belong to us. Though Matthew does make adjustments to serve his own purposes, he does not censor the people in the genealogy. Nor does he make any judgments about any of the people in the genealogy. They are all simply listed, members of Jesus's family. Jesus's people. Where he comes from and where he is rooted.

So let's take a look at a few of his ancestors. Some of them are famous. We probably have all heard of Abraham. His son Isaac, who nearly got sacrificed. Isaac's son Jacob, who is the one who stole his brother's birthright, the one who was father of the twelve tribes of Israel, a bit of a questionable character, really, not 100% saint. King David and King Solomon are in there, also questionable characters, especially in their personal lives. And then there is a long, long, long line of kings and we don't see much of anyone we recognize until Joseph, the husband of Mary and son of a different Jacob.

Sprinkled in that long long long line of kings are a couple I want to highlight. In verse 9, there is an Ahaz that pops up, who is the son of Uzziah in Matthew's reckoning. And in the reading from Isaiah this morning, that same King Ahaz who refuses to ask God for a sign. Isaiah responds by saying that God will send a sign anyway, and that sign will be the child, called Immanuel.

A bit later in that long long line of kings is Josiah, who is the only king who gets a wholehearted approval by the writers of the books of Kings and Chronicles. He turned the people of Israel back to proper worship and observance of the law. He centralized worship in Jerusalem. But even his reforms could not prevent the ultimate fall of the nation of Israel and the exile of the people.

So much like your family tree, a few of the people are mostly good, a few of the people are mostly not, and most of the people are just like us, mixed up, prone to make mistakes, and just as likely to turn the wrong way as the right.

What really stands out in Matthew's genealogy is the presence of four women, before he mentions Mary, who is the fifth. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba whom he just calls the wife of Uriah. Each of these women probably deserves her own sermon, and none of their stories are exactly G rated, but let's introduce them. Tamar is a widow, and the brothers of her deceased husband do not do their duty as required by the law to marry her and produce heirs for their brother. Desperate to fulfill her duty, and not condemned by the biblical writers for doing this, she tricks her father-in-law by posing as a prostitute. She becomes pregnant, and her son Perez is an ancestor of King David and thus of Jesus. Genesis 38, if you'd like to read the whole sordid tale.

Rahab is a prostitute in the city of Jericho. When Joshua and his men enter Jericho in preparation for conquering it, Rahab shelters them in her house of ill repute, shall we say. Again, the biblical writers do not condemn her for her profession, nor do they condemn Joshua and his men for being in her company. That's all in the book of Joshua. Matthew names her as the mother of Boaz, who becomes important to the next person in the chain, Ruth.

Ruth's story is found in the book of Ruth. She also is widowed, along with her sister in law and her mother in law. There is no one to fulfill the duty that I described with Tamar's story, so her mother in law Naomi decides to return to her home village of Bethlehem. Ruth decides to go with her, even though she is not an Israelite but a foreigner. After they settle there, Ruth entrances Boaz, and depending on how you read that story, and they marry. Ruth is the great grandmother of King David.

And King David is a man full of gifts of leadership and charm and charisma. And he is also a man full of selfishness and abuse of his own power. He decides that he wants Bathsheba, who is the wife of Uriah. David takes her and connives in several ways, eventually succeeding in getting Uriah killed in battle. This is not admirable conduct, to say the least. Bathsheba subsequently becomes one of David's wives and is the mother of Solomon. She intervenes at a key moment, near David's death, to ensure that Solomon becomes king rather than one of David's other sons. This sordid tale is in 2 Samuel 11 and 12, if you'd like to read the details.

It's curious that Matthew includes these women. Each of them were in a desperate situation and made choices that some might judge immoral. Maybe so. It also points to the failures of the men surrounding them, men that Matthew also names in the family tree. Tamar's father-in-law and brothers in law failed her. Whoever was supposed to be protecting Rahab failed her. And Joshua and his men certainly appear to have been engaging in recreational activity rather than in reconnoitering Jericho, as they were supposed to be. They really gave Rahab no choice but to help them. Ruth's people should have been willing to take her back in, rather than losing her to another country. And David's failures and sins against Bathsheba are the most obvious of all. Why in the world would Matthew bring all these stories to the forefront? Why would he remind people of these distasteful episodes in the lineage of Jesus?

Well, he's about to tell an unbelievable tale, about another young woman who, by all appearances, seems to have made some poor choices, whose betrothed spouse seems to have not treated her completely honorably, who is about to play a crucial role in the birth of Immanuel, God-with-us.

So it seems to me that Matthew is preparing the way. He's reminding us that God works through all kinds of people and all kinds of circumstances. He's reminding us that what we see from outward appearances is not the whole story. He's reminding us that the women, not just Mary, but the other women in Jesus's life, will have important roles to play in the gospel that is to follow, and they shouldn't be overlooked, or even hidden.

And most, if not all, of these women—in some cases we just aren't sure—but most of them are not Israelites by birth. And Matthew's gospel will include those men who travel from far away to see the baby Jesus. And his gospel will conclude with Jesus instructing us to "go and make disciples of all nations." Yes, Jesus is rooted in this family tree, this long lineage of the Jewish people. But what God is doing in and through Jesus is far bigger than that, and will encompass the nations these women came from and indeed the whole world.

These hidden figures in Matthew's first chapter are a witness to Immanuel, to God-with-us, to God being with us despite our sins and shortcomings, despite our human failings. And that is good news.