

Jesus' Family Tree – Matthew 1:1-11 – November 27, 2016

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My grandfather Hubert Leslie Wann was the family historian. He acquired a huge amount of genealogical data long before the internet came into existence. My grandfather compiled his data by contacting county clerk offices, visiting cemeteries and making phone calls to just about every Wann in the state of Indiana and beyond. Unfortunately, I was only two years old when my grandfather died, but his legacy of searching out the family history lives on in me and my cousin Karen.

With the online tool ancestry.com many people have discovered the fascinating world of genealogy. With the click of a mouse, one can view the digital image of the passenger log from a shipload of immigrants arriving through Ellis Island or a copy of a draft document or discharge papers for a soldier. Old photographs and obituaries, engagement and retirement announcements, census records – more and more tools for discovering our histories are becoming available to all of us. And many people are taking advantage of these tools.

But even if a person doesn't pursue the detailed history of his family, most folks do know something about their ancestry. They can tell of a relative who is famous for one thing or another. Perhaps they're related to an important figure in US History – an early president or a famous general. Maybe they have ties to an inventor or scientist. Or perhaps they have a few drops of blue blood from the Old Country. We take a bit of pride in claiming a relationship to someone who did something or stood for something. We are intrigued by that relationship. Conversely, we experience some discomfort if we discover a rogue among our forebears. Or we dismiss the relative, claiming him or her to be the black sheep of the family.

For me this fascination with genealogy was born in my childhood when I was captivated by the television miniseries *Roots*. I was enthralled by the story – less about the issue of slavery, but more on being able to trace one's roots so far back. I was enthralled that the writer of the story could trace his history back to a young man in Africa. I wanted to know more about my people. Who were they? Where did they come from? How did they get here? What did they do? But it was more than that. By learning about the people from whom I descended, I could learn more about myself.

Who am I? Where did I come from? How did I get here? What will I do?

Is my determination derived from my ancestors' pioneering spirit? Is my musical ability and creativity a part of my gene pool? Did my Scotch/Irish heritage on my mother's side draw me to the Presbyterians? In other words - how do my ancestors help to define who I am?

But that begs question – DO my ancestors help to define who I am? Is my identity tied to them?

Matthew seemed to think so. When we begin reading the gospel according to Matthew, the first 17 verses contain a long list of names. And not just a long list – a long BORING list of names. Really. If Matthew had submitted that as a paper in any college composition class, he would have failed the assignment. The first rule of writers' comp is to capture the attention of your audience, not bore them with a list of names. It is an opening comparable to the line "It was a dark and stormy night."

I would wager that any of us that sit down to read through the gospel of Matthew will skip right past those first 17 verses. We read the first few verses, then skim the rest. But to actually read each and word? Not so much. So why did Matthew do it?

First, we need to consider Matthew's audience. It was a first century Christian church comprised of Jewish believers. Matthew was writing at a time when Jewish converts to Christianity were trying to make sense of their Jewish history in light of there being more and more Gentile converts. They were having a crisis of identity. Does our Jewishness no longer have value? They were facing the necessity of having to blend cultures, to make a transition from the old way of understanding into a new way. They wanted to answer the question – How do we make sense of our history as Jews as we move forward in our lives as Christians?

Matthew understood their struggles. He wrote this gospel to help them understand who Jesus is. To show them that Christ is the bridge. When he reveals the genealogy of Jesus, these aren't simply random names. The Jewish Christians knew these people. They weren't just names, their names represented an anthology of stories, well-known stories from the history of Israel. As each name was read, it would immediately call to mind a particular event from their history. And the event would elicit a particular meaning.

This is the genealogy of Jesus. These are his people. This is where he comes from.

Consider this. If you walk into the church library or go up to the second-floor archive area, you'll find information and photos about the history of this congregation. Or maybe your family have been members here for many generations or you've heard the stories from the past. For many of you, just looking at the old photos will evoke certain impressions and memories. The people who have served here and worshipped here have left an imprint on the church's DNA. They help define who we are.

So Matthew begins the gospel by stating the Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of David, and the Son of Abraham. This is a powerful affirmation that Matthew makes.

Jesus is Messiah. Messiah simply means Christ or anointed one. It refers to a practice in the Old Testament where kings and priests were to be anointed. The anointing indicated that they were

set apart by God for a specific assignment or to perform certain functions. Over time, the word messiah began to take on a more special meaning. It grew to mean a particular anointed one. Not just a king, but THE king. The king of kings. The ultimate one.

The messiah would come from the line of King David and he would usher in a time of peace, deliverance, wisdom and righteousness for Israel. By identifying Jesus as Messiah, Matthew claims that Jesus is the one for whom they had been waiting. He is the hope of Israel. The dreams and longings were finally to be realized in him.

Jesus is also the Son of David. David was the most impressive and well-known of all the kings of Israel. He had his flaws, but he was the epitome of kings. David was regarded as the best king of all. By calling Jesus the Son of David, Matthew is saying that Jesus was like David, in all the most positive ways. He was David-esque.

But also, it had been prophesied that the Messiah would come from David's line. He would be a biological descendant of David. Now this is where things get a little interesting. Technically, according to Matthew, Jesus is not a descendant of David. Joseph is. But technically Joseph is not his father. So how does Matthew deal with that? That's a question to be answered next week!

In addition to being called the Messiah and the Son of David, Jesus is called the Son of Abraham. Abraham is recognized as the pioneer of the faith and is known as Father Abraham. He and his wife Sarah wholeheartedly trusted God. When God told them to go, they left their home and their kindred. They went where God sent them.

Also, Abraham was the one to whom God gave the promise, the promise that Abraham would be the father of a great nation and through him all the families on earth would be blessed. That is a powerful promise. Like Abraham, we will come to see in Matthew's gospel, that Jesus was completely faithful and trusting in God and that he was the fulfillment of God's promise – That he is the one through whom all families are blessed.

Then after this opening pronouncement, Matthew gets to the list of names. He divides them into epochs of 14 generations each. The division here is equal and the number 14 is two times the perfect number 7. It shows that God is an active part of history. The birth of Jesus was no coincidence. It was not a result of randomness. It was orderly and providential. The birth of Jesus had a point and purpose, and that was God's redeeming work in and through Jesus Christ.

Now as we read through the list of names, you might have noticed the inclusion of five women. To us that would not be much of a big deal. After all, we have all have women ancestors. It's part of the program. But for the Jews, genealogies were comprised of male names. It was

extremely rare to include the name of a woman. This exception to the rule causes us to take notice.

Take for instance a small crowd of people all dressed in white clothes. Imagine yourself standing on an observation platform high above and you look upon this sea of white. Then suddenly you notice a handful of people dressed in red, dispersed throughout the crowd. The white clothes no longer hold your attention, because your eye is immediately drawn to the people wearing red. They stand out. They don't fit the pattern, the norm. Why are they there? Why is there an exception? What do they represent?

And so in a crowd of male names, we find five women in the genealogy of Jesus. They are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the unnamed wife of Uriah, and finally Mary. These women each represent a powerful story in the history of Israel. Their stories were unique in that they highlighted times that were not neat and tidy. Their stories were anything but neat and tidy, and through them, they show God working in very startling ways.

The stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary were all significant points of time along the path towards the coming of the Messiah. They were surprising stories, stories on the path through which God's promise would be realized – stories that you might not expect to find in the history of the Messiah. Like the red clothes in a sea of white, the inclusion of these women signal that it's time to take a little closer look. To examine the hand of God, because God is about to work in a very startling way.

And that signal comes again, when Mary the wife of Joseph and the mother of Jesus, is named. Take notice, God is about to do something very unexpected.

Who is this Jesus? Matthew begins his gospel by telling us. Jesus is one who is called Messiah, Son of David, Son of Abraham. He comes from the bloodline of Israel and a few Gentile women. He comes from a long line of people who were faithful but flawed, a few who were rogues, great leaders, strong women, saints and sinners. He has come as the son of Mary and we wonder, as we gaze at the tiny, vulnerable infant, we wonder, what will he do?