

Sermon for 4<sup>th</sup> Advent A  
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Have you noticed that the Gospels are all a little different? Each has its own shape, its own special stories, its own emphasis. This is especially apparent in the stories about the birth of Jesus. Luke spends 2 whole chapters giving us detailed stories about the annunciation and birth of both John the Baptist and Jesus. Mark and John don't mention the birth at all.

We heard Matthew's version a moment ago. It is just 8 verses, from conception to birth. Do you remember what happens in the Luke stories about the birth of Jesus? Angel Gabriel, Mary says yes, gets pregnant, goes to visit Elizabeth, goes home, etc. Notice what happens in the Matthew account: (Joseph, Joseph, Joseph). Mary is there, of course, but the real important actor here is Joseph. This is the first point.

This is a short story focused on Joseph. But what you didn't hear was the start of Matthew, chapter 1, verses 1-17. I'll read it to you: "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, etc etc etc 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, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah" and so on and so on all the way to "Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

"So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations."

So what's the point of all these 17 verses? They show the genealogy of Jesus. And in a manner consistent with some strands of Judaism, it's neatly symmetrical in three equal parts, from Abraham to David, David to the Exile, and Exile to Jesus. (Note: to do that, Matthew left out some generations—but, details!) The point is to show that Jesus is directly descended from Abraham and King David, and that Jesus is the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promises through the prophets.

But here's the thing. Matthew has Jesus related to David and Abraham through Joseph, his earthly father, who provides him with absolutely no DNA. Isn't that interesting? That's point number 2. Luke mentions that Joseph is descended from David, but he is also careful to explain that Mary's family is connected to the priestly line—so Jesus has parents related to priests **and** kings. In Matthew, the emphasis is just on Joseph and on David's line.

Now if you dive into the genealogy a bit, you come up with some other interesting facts. Jacob, later known as Israel, had 12 sons, including the famous Joseph, who ended up in Egypt. But King David was descended from Jacob's son Judah. And Judah's sons Perez and Zerah were born to Tamar, his daughter-in-law. Yes. Tamar was married to Judah's son Er, who died without getting her pregnant and then she was married to Judah's other son Onan, who refused to get her pregnant and then was struck dead. Judah said he would give her his third son when he grew up, but he didn't, so Tamar took matters into her own hands. One day she dressed up as a prostitute and got Judah to lie with her and she got pregnant from him. So we have deceit on both parts and some incest going on.

Later on, we hear about Salmon, the father of Obed by Rahab. When the Hebrew people were coming out of 40 years in the wilderness, they sent spies to the Canaanite city of Jericho to check it out. Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho who protected the spies and thus saved her whole family from being killed when the Hebrew army came. And she was the great-grandmother of King David. Next we come upon Ruth. Ruth was a Moabite woman who followed her mother-in-law Naomi back to Judah and ended up marrying Naomi's kinsman Boaz. And then we have David, who had plenty of wives and children, but ended up sleeping with a married woman, Bathsheba and getting her pregnant, and then, to cover up his deed, had her husband Uriah killed in battle, so he could marry Bethsheba. Their son was Solomon.

That's quite a genealogy! Hardly a lineage of purity! Incest, deceit, prostitution, adultery and murder. Not a pure Jewish lineage either—prominent foreign women made this line possible. And at the end of this, the point is that Jesus is the promised Messiah, the new David, and he gets it through Joseph, who was of course shocked to learn that the baby wasn't his. But somehow he accepts that God is not pulling his leg and that Mary's baby is legitimately God's own. But also somehow, Joseph's own.

If that's not a weird genealogy, I don't know what is. But the truth of the matter is, all our genealogies are like that, I imagine. In my 30's I wanted to know more about my family and started reading up on it. We have pastors and teachers and scientists and musicians in our background. We also have mental illness and suicide and alcoholism and people on the spectrum and adultery and a family that split up, with one half going to Australia and one half moving to America. I recently found out that my some of my Dutch ancestors owned a sugar plantation—were slave owners-- on St. John's Island in the Caribbean until they couldn't handle the revolts and moved to Fishkill, NY. And that's only what I know.

I think the third point is this: In all the messiness of human life, all the sin and pain and brokenness, God finds a way through. God uses what's at hand to get her will done. God doesn't condone our bad behavior, but God finds a way through, no matter what. God is faithful and continues to look for opportunities to jump in, change our hearts, bring us back into relationship, show us mercy and grace. I think this kind of challenges the notion of God as business executive, having everything planned out perfectly ahead of time, and gives more of a view of God as artist, using the materials on hand to create what God has in mind.

So when God decided to come among us as a person, he chose two people to usher this baby in—Mary and Joseph. Joseph was “of the house of David,” and if God thought that in some weird way having Joseph as the father would count as Jesus being in the line of King David,

then why not? Is this any more farfetched than a lineage of murder and prostitution? I don't think so. God can make it happen.

In fact, in Luke and Matthew, each parent makes a commitment to spiritual and physical parenthood of Jesus. In Luke, Mary says "Yes" before the Holy Spirit comes over her and makes her pregnant. In Matthew, Joseph is going to divorce Mary quietly, but the angel comes to him in a dream and explains that Mary is pregnant by God and that he is to marry her, not divorce her. And he agreed to this, he said Yes to this great impossible thing and took her as his wife.

So this long strange genealogy isn't just about eggs and sperm. It's about faithfulness. It's about saying yes to God, even and especially in the messiness of life. Judah acknowledged that he had done wrong by Tamar by not giving her his grown son; David, when reprimanded by God through the prophet Nathan for what he did to Bathsheba and Uriah, repented and accepted his punishment. Rahab and Ruth are models of outsiders who recognized the power and grace of a foreign God, who said Yes and became part of the story of faith.

God will find a way. God always does. But God shows up in unexpected times and places. When God does, will we say yes to her? We have come through quite a year in this church and in our country and world. In church, the change has been constant, we all are getting older, but we seem to be through the worst of COVID and moving forward with some new ideas and energy. It's likely that you'll have a new priest in a few months. A lot is up in the air, uncertain, a bit messy. But God will show up. I believe it. Do you? And will you say yes?

As the year closes, we are coming upon the anniversary of the Capitol insurrection and much political division, too many mass shootings still, a climate crisis still. Sometimes I feel hopeless about the future. But my faith calls me to hope. To believe that no matter how huge, how messy, how intractable something seems, God will show up. I hold on to that. And will we say yes when God does?

Keep watch, therefore. Keep waiting, keep praying. For you families and friends, for this church community and all people of faith, for this nation, for other nations and our planet. Most of us, pray that God will show up and that we will say Yes. Amen.