

Sermon: Adding Your Name to the List

Year A, First Sunday of Advent

[Matthew 1:1-17](#)

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So if you've peeked into your pew bible at page 783, you've managed to stifle a groan. Your inner voice is shouting, "It's three paragraphs of names. Hasn't poor Dave/Russell suffered enough?". Well, yes. Now, we are pretty familiar with the infancy story from Luke because we read it every year. I wanted to take a deeper dive into Matthew's birth narrative and see what we can learn just from that.

So before we begin the "begat"ing, let's just describe what's going on when Matthew writes his Gospel, his good news. Best as we can tell, Jesus of Nazareth was born near the end of the reign of Herod the Great who died in 4 BCE. Jesus dies somewhere around 30 CE. Paul begins his ministry and starts writing his letters in the 40s. His goal is to help the followers of Jesus be ready for the ending of the world, which they were pretty sure was coming really soon. By about 70 CE, it's clear that the end of the world isn't coming immediately. That's when Mark writes his Gospel.

Right around the time Mark writes his Gospel, the Jews revolt against Rome and it ends just about as badly as you would expect. Instead of having a Jewish governor, the Romans put in their own guy, absolutely crush the rebellion with the maximum amount of bloodshed and violence. And they destroy the Temple in Jerusalem. The Jews always had their synagogues for worship, but the Temple was the center around which everything else revolved. And the Romans had not only desecrated it, they had physically destroyed it, leaving only a part of one retaining wall in place, what we know as the Western Wall.

Matthew and Luke both write their Gospels after the Temple is destroyed. Both Matthew and Luke use the Gospel of Mark when they write their Gospels, although they don't appear to have known about each other. Both Matthew and Luke are writing their Gospels when the Jewish community is having to redefine itself. The group of people who are proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus the Christ, are being turned out of the synagogues. They are also being joined by non-Jews, by gentiles, who want to be a part of a community that proclaims Jesus of Nazareth as the savior of the world.

Matthew's Gospel is written to present the facts that he has found that Jesus is the Messiah described in the Hebrew Bible. Matthew may rebut some of the negative stories going around about Jesus of Nazareth. However, Matthew's main goal is to present his argument for who Jesus is in a way that the Jewish followers of Jesus will appreciate and the Gentiles will learn from. The genealogy is part of that argument.

Why does this history matter? Because we are at a point where norms that have held us together are breaking apart. We thought we had made irreversible progress on race equality and we're finding we haven't. We thought we had made irreversible progress on economic equality and we're finding we haven't. We thought we could offer liberty and justice for all and we're finding that we're still struggling to define what "liberty", what "justice" mean and who "all" are. We're finding that we are struggling to keep ahold of a common set of facts to base our conversations on. And we're finding that all those challenges have been there since the beginning of our nation. Matthew is facing something so similar, it was almost painful for me to

prepare this series of sermons. So let us explore what Matthew did, not only for what it teaches us about Jesus back then, but what it can teach us for our common life today.

Matthew 1:1-17, p. 783

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

Let me interrupt to say that the Greek word for “genealogy” is genesis. Matthew is pointing at the beginning not only of Jesus’ story, but of all our story.¹ Every time you hear so-and-so was the father of this-and-such, he’s using the word genesis. Matthew is going to slam that concept of genesis into our face, with all its myriad of meanings, the whole way through this passage.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,

Judah is the fourth of Jacob’s twelve sons, who found the Twelve Tribes of Israel.² That’s why Jesus will eventually take twelve disciples. In a culture where the first-born sons inherit everything and are the most important, Matthew is tracing Jesus’ line through men who are not the first born. Isaac is not, Jacob is not, Judah is not. For Matthew, God is intervening in human history again and again and again, having to overcome our limitations.

and Judah the father of Perez [*Per’-ez*] and Zerah [*Zer’-a*] by Tamar,

Tamar is the first of five women mentioned in Jesus’ genealogy. Her husband died and by tradition she was then married to his brother. That brother died and while there was still another brother, her father-in-law refused to marry her to his third son. So disguises herself and seduces her father-in-law who is ... Judah.

and Perez [*Per’-ez*] the father of Hezron [*Hez’-ron*], and Hezron [*Hez’-ron*] the father of Aram [*Ar’-am*], and Aram [*Ar’-am*] the father of Aminadab [*A-minn’-a-dab*], and Aminadab [*A-minn’-a-dab*] the father of Nahshon [*Na’-shon*], and Nahshon [*Na’-shon*] the father of Salmon [*Sal’-mon*], and Salmon [*Sal’-mon*] the father of Boaz [*Boh’-az*] by Rahab [*Reh’-hab*],

Rahab is the next woman. Matthew has kind of bolted her story into the genealogy. Basically she’s a foreigner, a prostitute, who side with the Israelites when they want to conquer her town.

and Boaz [*Boh’-az*] the father of Obed [*Oh’-bed*] by Ruth,

Ruth we know because she has her own book in the Bible. She’s a foreigner married to Naomi’s son who dies and when Naomi tries to send her back to her people, she declines. She actually finds a way to protect both herself and Naomi, in part by seducing Boaz and getting him to marry her.

and Obed [*Oh’-bed*] the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

So here we are at King David. This is the golden age for Israel. They were strong. They were independent. They were united as a people. The world may be a mess under the Romans, but

¹ Raymond E. Brown, S.S, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1979), 58.

² Brown, 69.

God has promised great things for God's people. There's proof that God means it, because there was that time when David reigned.

As Christians, we've followed the same logic. Jesus has promised to come into this world again and there's proof that God means it, because Jesus came that first time.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah [*Yoo'-rye-a*],

We know the "wife of Uriah as" Bathsheba. Before Solomon inherits his father's throne there is rape and murder and civil war and prophets and repentance. There's a whole soap opera/telenovela that has to go on and while I personally would argue that David bears much of the responsibility for the drama, Bathsheba was always viewed as a bad influence on David.

and Solomon the father of Rehoboam [*Re-hohb-oh'-am*], and Rehoboam [*Re-hohb-oh'-am*] the father of Abijah [*Ab-eye'-jah*], and Abijah [*Ab-eye'-jah*] the father of Asaph [*Eh'-saff*], and Asaph [*Eh'-saff*] the father of Jehoshaphat [*Je-hosh'-e-fat*], and Jehoshaphat [*Je-hosh'-e-fat*] the father of Joram [*Joh'-ram*], and Joram [*Joh'-ram*] the father of Uzziah [*Uzz-eye'-a*], and Uzziah [*Uzz-eye'-a*] the father of Jotham [*Joh'-tham*], and Jotham [*Joh'-tham*] the father of Ahaz [*Eh'-haz*], and Ahaz [*Eh'-haz*] the father of Hezekiah [*Hez-ek-eye'-a*], and Hezekiah [*Hez-ek-eye'-a*] the father of Manasseh [*Man-ass'-e*], and Manasseh [*Man-ass'-e*] the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah [*Jekh-o-ny'-ya*] and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

If the reign of King David was the Golden Age, the deportation to Babylon was the worst of the worst. Israel had lost everything, including, it seemed, the protection of God. So this genealogy of Jesus is leading us from the best of times to the worst.

And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah [*Jekh-o-ny'-ya*] was the father of Salathiel [*Sal-a'-th-ee-el*], and Salathiel [*Sal-a'-th-ee-el*] the father of Zerubbabel [*Zer-ubb'-a-bell*],

Zerubbabel is the last name we can find in the Hebrew Scriptures.³ So from here on out, Matthew appears to be relying on other sources. Matthew is still hitting on his theme. Even in the darkest days, when human activity appears to have completely derailed God's plan, Zerubbabel still has a son who survives to continue the line of David, even in exile.

and Zerubbabel [*Zer-ubb'-a-bell*] the father of Abiud [*Ab-eye'-ood*], and Abiud [*Ab-eye'-ood*] the father of Eliakim [*E-lie'-a-kim*], and Eliakim [*E-lie'-a-kim*] the father of Azor [*A'-zor*], and Azor [*A'-zor*] the father of Zadok [*Zad'-okk*], and Zadok [*Zad'-okk*] the father of Achim [*Ah'-kimm*], and Achim [*Ah'-kimm*] the father of Eliud [*Ee'-lie-ood*], and Eliud [*Ee'-lie-ood*] the father of Eleazar [*Ell-ee-ehz'-er*], and Eleazar [*Ell-ee-ehz'-er*] the father of Matthan [*Math'-an*], and Matthan [*Math'-an*] the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

Note that at the last step, the format has changed slightly. Joseph is not "the father of" Jesus, but rather "the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born". I will go into more detail next week, but the repetition is broken for a reason. We know about the Holy Spirit, and Joseph not being

³ Brown, 61.

Jesus' biological father. But if you've done all this work to trace a genealogy to Joseph and then Joseph just ends up being the husband, have we all wasted our time? I'll argue that we haven't, but let me let Dave/Russell finish.

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.

Round of applause for Dave/Russell. Clearly, he has won a Christmas cookie from the collection downstairs!

So in the end, we started with Abraham and we ended with Jesus. Now if you want this great genealogy to be a history of biology, you're going to be disappointed. If you want to see the fourteen generations in each great epoch of Jewish history, you're going to be disappointed. There are only 13 in the first one (although Abraham has to come from somewhere), there are 14 in the second one, but Matthew has left out three kings from 1 Chronicles to make it be 14 and the third one has 13.⁴ Plus the clock time between Abraham and David, David and the Exile to Babylon and the Exile and Jesus are all way longer than 14 generations. So, no, you can't do a DNA test and get the same results. This genealogy doesn't match Luke's genealogy either. Luke says Jesus' grandfather's name is Eli and Matthew says it's Jacob, something you think they'd have been able to check.

But the point for both Matthew and Luke is not biological productivity⁵. It's to answer the question of who is Jesus? Jesus is the salvation God has been building to all along. God worked with all our limitations, all those second and third and fourth sons to keep the line going. God worked with political triumphs and flawed kings, with military destruction and isolation. God worked with the best and the brightest and God worked with the weakest and least important.

You want to argue that Mary was just some girl who got in trouble? Matthew definitely doesn't see it that way. Come back next week and we'll dig into that more. But so what if she was? Look at Tamar and Rahab and Ruth and Bathsheba. They all had irregular romantic relationships. More than that, if they hadn't seen it as their job to map out alternative pathways to the future, if they hadn't sought hidden possibilities or loopholes in the Law, Israel's history would have been cut short.⁶ We know Sarah and Rebecca and Rachel's stories. They were amazing women whose relationship with God has been documented. But there were plenty of other women along the way who did just as much to keep God's relationship with God's chosen people going. You can't discard Mary because she's not playing a typical role.

For Matthew, you cannot look at Jesus and not see the whole history of the relationship of God with the people of Israel. You cannot look at Jesus and not see how God worked, again and again, to save God's chosen people. Even when it seemed like there was no salvation available, when it seemed like there was nothing worth saving.

Matthew lived in a time when everything was splintering apart. Matthew lived in a time where what you believed got you kicked out of one community, isolated from people you had known your whole life, whom you had lived next to for years. Matthew lived in a time when it was

⁴ Brown, 81-84.

⁵ Brown, 68.

⁶ Irene Nowell, "Jesus' Great-Grandmothers: Matthew's Four and More." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70 (1) (2008), 12-13.

matter more and more who was Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female (Galatian 3:28). Matthew lived at a time when the most wealthy were just taking more and more of the pie, changing the laws of the land to make it even more difficult for the little people to hold on to what they had. Matthew lived at a time when the dominant political power was maintaining its grip by dividing the people under its control.

Matthew lived in a time we really recognize. And in the middle of that heartbreaking, stomach turning, depressing mess, Matthew said, "Look. God has been with us from the beginning. God has worked with our limitations." Matthew said, "Look. There have been little people, people on the fringes of society. Women for pete's sake, who have figured out ways around the mess to the hidden and promised future that God is calling forth." Matthew said, "And it all leads to Jesus and his teaching." Matthew said, "look at this list, not in general but in its specifics. Look at the stories behind each name. Add your name to this list." Add your name to this list. Be a part of what God is doing in this world through *Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham*.