

“There’s Room for Every Story”
Matthew 1:1-17

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If I was to ask the congregation right now to tell the Christmas story, we would craft a narrative that begins with an angel visiting Mary and then Joseph, and then we would describe their long, laborious journey to Bethlehem, inn keeper and all. It is a story we know well, one we have seen acted out by our children and youth in Christmas Eve plays. It is one we retell each and every year. It is the story that unfolds before us whenever we look at our own nativities that we place on our altars, carefully setting into place the holy parents, a manger, and barnyard animals surrounding them...but I’ve yet to find a nativity set that includes Abraham and David and Isaac and Jacob and Judah and Perez and Tamar and Boaz and Rahab and all 42 people that are lifted up as the ancestors of Jesus. That would be one crowded manger scene.

And yet, in Matthew they are here, a genealogy inviting us to begin our story in a much earlier time, to trace our way through a spiritual and political history that weaves together Jesus’ life with the lives of so many who came before him. It helps us orient his story in relation to others, urging us to pay attention to where he came from as much as where he goes in the years to come after his birth.

I am partial to the genealogy not because it is undisputed - it is very much disputed in terms of historical accuracy - but because of the layers of history and meaning it adds to the birth of Jesus, because of who it makes room for in the Christmas story. The Christmas story includes celebrated leaders like Abraham and royalty like King David. It includes Ruth who is known for her faithfulness and loyalty to her mother-in-law, a story that is very much to be commended in a holiday season that comes with the trope of struggling with your in-laws. But speaking of in-

laws, the story also includes Judah and Tamar who are in-laws that have an illicit, deceitful affair for the sake of securing an inheritance.

And speaking of affairs! The Christmas story also includes Bathsheba, who was married to Uriah, and whose affair with King David results in Uriah's death and the tragic death of her child as punishment for David's sins. In both of these stories, what we call an affair in shorthand are not the mutual, modern day affairs we might imagine - there is too much of an imbalance of power across gender and stations and political roles - these stories are more in line with modern day sexual coercion or assault. And still, they are part of Jesus' genealogy.

They are part of the invisible cast of characters in our Christmas nativity that remind us who gets a place in this sacred story. It includes respected ancestors and complicated relationships alike. It includes stories of trauma and of triumph, hardship and beauty, woven together in the messiness of humanity. The genealogy of Jesus does not shy away from a difficult narrative for the sake of sanitizing the Christmas story - no it reminds us that sacred stories include everyone - the heroes and the villains, the tarnished and the celebrated.

In the stories behind the long list of names in the gospel of Matthew I hear an invitation for us to bring our own complicated stories to the Christmas season. Each of us, whether we keep the stories buried deep in our memories or share them freely at our family tables, has inherited a long line of ancestors that would find themselves in good company, or perhaps bad company, with Jesus's own ancestors.

When we look into our family trees we find stories of family members that have been pushed aside, or we find stories that evoke unresolved grief and unfinished fights, or we don't find stories at all but instead find questions: whatever happened to Grandma's sister? Why doesn't that cousin come home for the holidays? Why doesn't dad speak to his dad? We find

questions that leave us longing to fill in the untold stories and gaps in our history, longing to bring to the surface the complications and pain that need to be spoken aloud before healing can begin.

The complicated stories are unique to each family. Some are made more complicated because of the gaps caused by adoption or separation or estrangement. Some are complicated because the grief or pain from wounds is still fresh - the stories still being written around us. But for anyone who has wished the story of their family was more like a Hallmark Christmas movie, know that being picture perfect is not the goal of Christmas. Being faithful is the goal and faithfulness requires authenticity of self, it requires liberation not shaming or hiding away, it requires gentleness and compassion for the ways we struggle together.

Our worship theme this Advent and Christmas season is *From Generation to Generation*. It was chosen in honor and celebration of the messy, glorious genealogy of Jesus and from the words of Mary, who in her song to the angel when she finds out she is pregnant includes this verse:

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation. (Luke 1:48b-50)*

This season we are invited to reflect on the people whose stories we carry with us each Christmas season. Who are the people we gather with at the holidays whose love gives us strength the rest of the year? Who are the people missing from our tables that we long to see again, or whose blessed memory still shapes our celebrations and traditions today? What are the stories we want to pass on to our children and grandchildren - who will we tell them stories

about? What traditions will we share with them? What traditions will we make anew in the spirit of healing and justice and hope that breaks out of past family patterns or unearths old secrets?

Christmas is a season when the distance between the generations seems to melt away. It is the one time a year when we all seem to know the same songs and can sing them in unison. It is the season for honoring where we have come from and in telling the story of the birth of Jesus, proclaim who we want to be, who we long to be, who God is calling us to be.

As we tell the story of Jesus' birth, I pray we will find connections between that sacred story and our own. I pray that time will bend and shrink between Bethlehem and Lansing - between our spiritual ancestors and our modern families - that in making connections between the far off past and the present we will discover a continuous narrative of God at work in the world and in our lives, drawing us into relationships that shape us, inspire us, challenge us, and change us.

Part of our storytelling this month is an all-church photo exhibit. Each of you is invited to think of one or two pictures you would like to share with the congregation - pictures of your own generations, your ancestors or your family, whether it is your family of origin or your family by choice. When we think about the stories we tell, whose picture do you want to add to our church family album? We are displaying them all together on the big bulletin board in the hallway. We are happy to make copies of your photo for you in the office or you can email us a copy - add them to the bulletin board anytime this month.

I added two of my own family photos to get us started. One of the photos is of my Great Great Grandmother Lucy. I did not grow up knowing Lucy's name or story. I found her name buried in a six page family tree that I was gifted by my father's sister. Lucy was one of dozens of names that were unfamiliar to me, nothing noted except where she died, the years she

lived, the names of her parents, and the names of her husband and children. It was in searching her name online that I found more of her story and legacy, and even her photo immortalized on google.

Lucy and her family were part of an ethnic group that experienced great persecution during their lifetime. It was the Victorian era when acknowledging that particular group or recording their stories was frowned upon, but that is exactly what Lucy did. She recorded the stories she heard as a child from her grandfather in an attempt to honor his memory. She wrote about cultural traditions and beliefs of her ancestors and preserved their history. She compiled these stories into a book that was published, and 130 years later her book is still preserved as a part of the Smithsonian Institute. Because my Great Great Great Grandmother Lucy understood the power of telling family stories, I am able to forge a connection with the past that would have otherwise been unknown today.

The Advent and Christmas season is about telling stories. It is about telling and retelling the story of Jesus's birth and then finding our way into that story. It is about stretching the expanse of time to include those stories that shaped Jesus' family and wondering anew how we might be shaped by the ones who came before us and how we are called to shape the generations to come. It is a season of looking for God in our stories - finding God's healing peace in the painful stories and the grief filled memories, and rejoicing with gratitude for God's presence in the tales of love and hope. This season we are invited to look underneath the names that we speak, the ancestors, Mary, Joseph, and so many more, to find deeper meaning in the traditions we have inherited and the ones we create anew. May it be so.