

Preparing The Way: Matthew
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
November 28, 2021-AM Service
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Matthew 1:1-17

Do you know what a genogram is? If you're a therapist or a social worker, you probably do. A genogram is a tool that some therapists use in their sessions. I've done a genogram as part of some ministry support groups I've been involved with. A genogram is a kind of flowchart of your family. In the group with my minister buddies, we each diagrammed our families. We went back to our grandparents and we mapped out the whole system. Every uncle, every aunt, every cousin went on the genogram. And we didn't just write their names, we noted all the stories – successes and failures, divorces and deaths, triumphs and tragedies. Then in our meetings, each of us would have an entire session devoted to going through our genogram, telling our family stories to the rest of the group. It really worked well. By the time your colleague was done with his genogram, you looked at him and said, "Now I get it! That explains why you are the way you are!"

Matthew 1 is like Jesus' genogram. We usually call Matthew 1 the genealogy of Jesus, but when you look at it closely, it's more like a genogram. Matthew 1 isn't just a list of names; it's a list of stories. Behind every name here is a larger set of stories, stories that Matthew's Jewish readers would have known well. Matthew wants us to think of these stories, because when we put all the names and the stories together, we will get a deep sense of who Jesus is and what his family is about. We will also get a deep sense of who Jesus' Father is, and what purposes he has in sending his Son to the world.

I don't have the time to go through every name on the chart and tell each story. Instead I want to make two broad points this morning. Let's read Jesus' 'genogram' and then let me say just two things we learn from this genogram.

Let's start with Matthew's first two words in the Greek. Here are the first two words of Matthew's gospel which are also the first two words of the New Testament in Greek. *Biblos Geneseos*. Biblos. Even if you don't know Greek you can figure that one out. A bibliography is a list of books. Biblos means book. Geneseos is a little harder, but it sounds like an English word you know. Here's a hint. Geneseos is in the genitive form, the root nominative form is Genesis. So the first two words of the New Testament are, *The Book of Genesis*.

That's interesting, isn't it? That's a provocative beginning. Did you know that? I confess I didn't have that straight till this week, and I find that amazing. The Holy Spirit did not do this by accident. When you start the first book of the New Testament, you are meant to think of the first book of the Old Testament.

Our English Bible translates Biblos Geneseos as "this is the genealogy of," and that's a fine translation. Genesis is a Greek word and it can be translated as 'ancestry' or 'genealogy'. Part of what Matthew means to say is: 'this is Jesus' family tree.' But Biblos Genesis means more than that! Genesis can also mean 'origins' or 'beginning.' Matthew's not just saying, 'here is Jesus' genealogy,' he's saying, 'this is a new beginning! This is Genesis 2.0! Everything is about to change. The purposes that God began at the creation of the world when he said 'Let there be light' are being fulfilled in the child born to Mary and Joseph!' When Matthew wrote Biblos Geneseos, he was saying to the people, 'God's story continues!' He hasn't lost the thread.

Many of the people of that day probably were wondering if God had lost the thread of the story. God's story looked to be in pretty bad shape. If Pew and Barna were taking surveys of religious attitudes back then, the numbers would have been grim. Israel had been poor and occupied for hundreds of years. Really going all the way back to 587 BC and the invasion of Babylon, they'd been subject to foreign powers: Babylon, Persia, Greece, and now Rome. All that seemed totally contrary to the stories they'd been told as kids. God had promised to Abraham that his descendants would be great among the nations and that all of the nations would be blessed through them, but in terms of political power, Israel was not great. God had also promised David that one of his descendants would always sit on the throne. But no son of David was sitting on the throne in Jerusalem. King Herod was on the throne and he was certainly not a descendant of David. David's descendants were just regular folks. Farmers, shepherds, carpenters. Just regular Joes, regular Josephs, trying to get by. After 600 years of disappointment, the people must have been saying to themselves, 'Maybe all those stories they'd heard as kids were just wishful thinking. Maybe it was all make believe.'

Into this disillusionment Matthew says, "Biblos Geneseos!" The old story continues. God has not forgotten his promises. Lift up your heads people! Let me tell you the story of Jesus the Messiah, son of David, Son of Abraham. The Son of David will reign forever on the throne and all the earth will be blessed through him. All the old promises will come true.

Maybe you're starting off this Advent with disillusionment. Maybe it feels like your life has lost the thread of its story. Your family isn't a place of rest and refuge, it's a source of stress and concern. Your retirement isn't a series of idyllic vacations; it's a series of trips to the doctor and the emergency room. Your job is dull. The world around you seems to be coming apart. You don't feel like a holy pilgrim on your way to glory making steady progress down the road to sanctification; you feel like you're going in circles. If there's any of that in you, let me speak Matthew's words into the beginning of your advent: Biblos Geneseos! You may have lost the thread of your story, but I promise you he has not. He has you firmly in his hand. He will make a way. He can make a new beginning.

So the first thing we see when we look at Jesus' genealogy is that his heavenly Father is a God of strong promises and new beginnings. The second thing I want us to see in this genealogy has to do with the people in it.

Genealogies were not just a Biblical thing; they were common in other ancient sources. And most of the time when someone took the time to write a genealogy, they did it to show their credentials, they did it to show the quality of the bloodline. Genealogies were about establishing pure bloodlines and good connections. Genealogies were a way of showing that you came from quality stock.

We still use ancestry that way. 'See Bob over there, on his Mother's side his family can trace their roots to George Washington.' 'Your daughter is dating Bill Vandersma? Oh, he's from good stock! His mother's dad taught at the University of Michigan and his Grandpa was the reverend Hendrik Vandersma. He was an echte Domine! Everyone liked him!' This is what we do!

Jesus' genogram doesn't do that. Jesus' genogram does the opposite of that. All the dirty laundry is put out on the line for the neighbors to see. All the skeletons are taken out of the closet and dumped in on the front lawn. This list is full of people with a past. Jacob was a liar and a cheat. David was an adulterer and a murderer. Ahaz and Mannasseh sacrificed their children to pagan gods. Jehoram, Rehoboam, and Abijah are all on the list, and every one of them were unfaithful kings who did not walk in God's ways.

And then there are the women. In his commentary, the New Testament scholar Dale Bruner points out that genealogies typically didn't include women. It was all fathers and sons. The only exception to that would be if the woman was exceptional in some way. The only way you would include a woman in the genealogy was if she was exceptional or her family was exceptional. You'd include her if her name added luster to the family tree. Now there were four women who were celebrated as the great mothers of faith in the Jewish tradition and who are still celebrated as the great mothers of the faith in the Jewish tradition. They are Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel. Bruner mentions a contemporary Passover song sung by 20th century Jews that emphasizes these four matriarchs. *"Who knows the four? I know four. Four are the matriarchs. Three are the patriarchs, two are the tablets of the covenant, one is our God."*

Matthew could have mentioned the four matriarchs, and each of them would have brought luster to Jesus' line. Instead he mentions Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. None of these women add luster. In fact, they do the opposite. Each of these women evoke scandal and failure.

You sometimes hear these women called the four sinful women of Matthew's genealogy. I think that's misleading. With the exception of Rahab, these women aren't sinners. Rahab was a prostitute, that's a sin, so it is scandalous that Jesus should be descended from a prostitute. But the rest of the women aren't particularly sinful. Three of the women are scandalous because they are foreigners. Instead of showing a pure Jewish bloodline, Matthew emphasizes the intermarriage. Rahab was a Canaanite. Ruth was from Moab. Bathsheba was a Hittite. Two of these women are scandalous, not because of what they do, but because they expose the sin in the men of Jesus' ancestry. Bathsheba's name reminds us of what David did: abuse of power, adultery, and then murder. Tamar's name reminds us what Judah did: callously ignored his obligations to the poor and slept with a prostitute. Matthew didn't pick these names to show purity of bloodline and purity of character. In fact, it seems like he chose them (the Holy Spirit chose them) for the opposite reason. They were chosen to remind everyone that Jesus' family was an unholy mess.

In other words, Matthew puts these women in there to remind us that Jesus' family was like your family and my family, and he has come to save all of us messy people from our sins. The God who was willing to let his Son be part of this messy family is willing to save you and your messy family. The God who sent his son for these messed up people can save a messed up person like you.

Matthew's approach to history is interesting. When it comes to the histories of our families or our ancestors we have two tendencies. Sometimes we hide the flaws and put an extra shine on the heroes. We hide the mistakes and embarrassments and amplify the heroics. We put an extra layer of lacquer on the figures from our past so that we can feel great about our present. OR we obsess on the failures of the past, and look on our past as hopeless and beyond redemption. The Holy Spirit does not take either of these approaches. Matthew's list of names lays out both the heroism and the failure of the past. Both the good and the bad are laid out there. Because for Christians, our hope for the future does not depend on the excellence of our ancestors. For Christians, our hope for the future is not destroyed by the failures of our ancestors. We expect that our past will be a mixture of heroism and shame because we are people, and the line between good and evil runs down the middle of us all. Matthew's genealogy reminds us that our hope is not in the people of our past, our hope is in Joseph and Mary's boy. "You are to call him Jesus," says the angel to Joseph in verse 21, "because he will save his people from their sins."

Here in this family, here with the coming of this savior, there is a place for everyone and there is hope for everyone. Like David's family, has your family been damaged by adultery? There's a place for you in this family and a new beginning in Jesus. Like Bathsheba and Tamar, are you the victim of abuse, have you suffered trauma at the hands of powerful people? There's a place for you in this family and a new beginning in Jesus. Like the people of Israel, are you worn out from your long struggle to the point that you've just about lost the sense of God's work in your life? There is a place for you in this family, Jesus has not forgotten his promises to you, and there will be a new beginning for you in Jesus.

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