

Earlier this year, we did a deep dive of Matthew's Gospel. I know it's been a while, but one of the points I argued was that Matthew's author is intent on proving the Jewishness of Jesus. Matthew's community has been marginalized from its peer communities because of its belief in Jesus as Messiah. This gospel seeks to tell the world that those who follow Jesus do so in a manner that is wholly congruent and consistent with Jewish tradition. Matthew's Jesus reminds local leaders that he has not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it.

Chapter one, as much as any portion of Matthew's Gospel, seeks to credential Jesus – it begins with a genealogy or family tree. The genealogy spans 42 generations linking Joseph's lineage to a Who's Who of Israel: post-exilic leaders, King David, and Abraham to name a few. The Mayflower's travel ledger has got nothing on Matthew's genealogy!

If we read this genealogy too quickly, we might just assume it's a list full of old men with three and four-syllable names. And to be fair it is! But you'll also find something very interesting. Matthew mentions four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. That they are mentioned at all is a big deal, but it's more than that.

All four women are foreigners: Tamar and Rahab are Canaanites, Ruth is a Moabite, and Bathsheba is a Hittite. (Remember when we read Exodus this fall? Oh, how the writers worried about boys who brought home foreign girls!). All four women, despite difficult circumstances, take initiative, and ensure the lineage that eventually produces David and Solomon. They mother the leadership of Israel. Most importantly, all four women endure unfounded patriarchal criticisms and abuses that distort their sense of duty, painting them as promiscuous and sexually immoral.

Tamar is widowed, and because of her brother-in-law's inaction, she must trick her father-in-law into helping her conceive. Rahab is a staunch ally of Joshua, and she spies to help secure Israel's successful invasion of Jericho. She's also a prostitute who must use her body and skillful art of deceit to ensure the survival of her family. Ruth is widowed, and must seduce Boaz to ensure the wellbeing of herself, and her mother-in-law, Naomi. Bathsheba, minding her own business, is raped, widowed, abducted, and eventually forced to marry David.

The Deuteronomistic historians and traditionalists would have you believe that Messiah might come about like so: Faithful men, alongside chaste women, live in a covenant of mutual responsibility – Abraham, and David, and others live with empathy, and humility, and presence and grace. And the line lives on, cleanly, neatly, unceremoniously. Lived Torah is a predictable script.

And yet in just the saying aloud of their names, we learn from Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba a more nuanced version of the story. Messiah doesn't come about, because of the redacted perfection of Israel's male protagonists; Messiah comes about, because strong, women, left with no choice but to endure, endure. Let's phrase it this way: 42 generations of Jewish men clumsily, and in many instances, cruelly, enact and execute the laws and customs of the land. But in the margins, women of faith, from every background and circumstance, live with a spirit that fulfils the law.

All of this is the setup for today's text. Mary is engaged to Joseph, but gasp...before they are officially married, Mary is found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

I'll be honest with you – this verse is troublesome to me, because just like in Luke's text last week, it sure doesn't feel like Mary's got a whole lot of autonomy in this matter. It seems as if God has just decided what's gonna be for Mary. And if the experience of her ancestors is any indication, her path isn't going to be all that smooth.

Then again, maybe God got tired of 42 generations of men insisting that their marriages should be transactional rather than relational. Maybe God tired of men refusing to see the humanity in their wives. Maybe God decided that some sense of affection, some usefulness, some connectedness was necessary in the process of conception. Maybe, since God knew Mary was in for such a challenging assignment, God would seek to at least spare her the abuses and humiliation endured by her ancestors.

Regardless, Mary is going to be a mother. And as we enter this present moment, Matthew's author reminds us that we can only enter it with presence and hope if we remember our past. Yes, a thousand times yes, we want, we need, we expect, we long for Jesus to finally be that manifestation of the King who doesn't act like kings before him. But we also need to long for a world, where the mothering figures of Messiah don't have to give away every security and freedom to make it so.

And if we think in that sphere, maybe we can hear Joseph's plan in a new light. He was going to quietly dismiss Mary. I suppose that's not as bad as what some of his ancestors did to the women in their lives, but it's certainly not a ringing endorsement for Joseph. He still seems stuck in an application of Torah that is transactional rather than relational.

But it's not all bad; despite the little patriarchal angel that sits on his shoulder, Joseph is also moved by the Spirit. Somehow, someday,

Joseph is freed to open his mind to new possibilities. Maybe he asks himself, “I wonder how I’d feel if someone quietly dismissed me?” Maybe he’s now awake to the idea of a God who never dismisses or discards anyone or anything in creation? Maybe he’s tired of living how most men have chosen to live, and he’s now ready to live into how God’s intends for men to live. Maybe he’s ready to express a little something of the Spirit that’s already shaped Mary, and will soon shape his child.

You know the rest of the story. The angel speaks of fulfilled prophecies, and reminds Joseph that he is to marry Mary, and that their child will be named Jesus, and save humanity from its sins.

I know some of you may get bent out of shape about hearing those words *save* and *sins*. I don’t think it means what so many have tried to make it over the years – this isn’t some inoculation; this isn’t the creation of some cosmic algorithm to cipher your good deeds and bad deeds; this isn’t some violent form of payment and relief. I think it’s as simple as this: God’s coming into the world is the kind of catalyst that makes us long to boldly embrace rather than quietly dismiss our neighbors.

It's also not for nothing that Joseph marries Mary, raises Jesus, and treats each of them with the love and respect. Just as Mary will do all she can to protect the fragile life that grows within her womb, Joseph will do all he can to protect his vulnerable family. Herod and the establishment will be quick to silence news of a Messiah shaped and fashioned in the authentic love of God, one destined to turn the order of things right-side-up. Joseph will shepherd his family through the dark days of exile in Egypt as political refugees. And he will eventually

bring them back to Nazareth, where Jesus and his siblings will grow in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

It's funny. I bet you at least a dozen times, in this very meetinghouse, I've gone out of my way to tell you about the shocking way God chooses to come into the world, and manifest a sense of solidarity with humanity. God births something new from a marginalized family in a forgotten part of the world. And don't get me wrong, the Jesus story definitely defies expectations. But as I read this text, and the genealogy that precedes it, I am reminded that there's nothing new and surprising about God defying our expectations. God has a history of wading into the messiness of life with us – and not just wading, but swimming, and splashing, and running through the sprinklers, too!

I guess I always thought Matthew was credentialing Jesus with a bloodline that any Pharisee or Sadducee would envy. But that's not true. Matthew is reminding readers, us included, that the birth of Jesus follows in the rich tradition of messiness. Prostitutes, and tricksters, and widows, and even victims, have never stopped being God's people. Chauvinists, and power-grabbers, and patriarchs for that matter as well. You see, God's Spirit, God's love, God's creativity has the ability, and indeed the desire, to embrace what the systems of this world keep asking us to dismiss. God isn't in the business of reclamation because God never stops claiming God's children.

Matthew tells us that Jesus is born of Mary and Joseph. And if we've been paying attention, we ought to know that's all that's needed to bring about God's desired newness. It's a good day for a baby shower, Sardis Baptist Church. It's an even better year to proclaim the Lord's favor.

***Jolting Joe de Nazareth***  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent (Love), 12/18/2022**  
**Matthew 1:18-25**



a spiritually  
progressive  
community  
of faith

Amen.