

“Matthew’s Story: Generations”

Matthew 1:1-17

November 28, 2010

Are you bored yet? Isn't this the most exciting scripture reading ever? Forty-two generations of nearly unpronounceable names, why would I read something like that as the lesson for the day? Well, it could be that I didn't learn anything from the series on the seven deadly sins and I'm trying to show off by demonstrating that I'm able to pronounce all those names and I'm being prideful and trying to make you envious. Let's hope it's not that. Maybe there is a point to reading these names. Maybe there's a reason that Matthew had in including them. He is starting to tell the story of Jesus. Why would he start with a list of begats? Why would he begin with a genealogy?

We know from other sources that genealogies were not all that common during Jesus' time. Except in priestly families, which Jesus and Mary and Joseph's was not, detailed records were just not available in those days. Many genealogies were tangled and even some religious leaders could not trace their family lines. Some rabbis taught that it would all get sorted out before the Messiah came when Elijah came so they weren't going to worry about it until then. Typically, Mary and Joseph would not have known much about their genealogy. They were poor people, not from a powerful or religiously significant family. Sure, Joseph was descended from David, but that was a thousand years ago, lots of people were descended from David. So this genealogy as written by Matthew may have been unknown to Mary and Joseph and even to Jesus, so why does Matthew think it is so important that he begins his gospel with it?

Do you know anything about your genealogy? Some people take a lot of pride in finding out about their ancestors. A few years ago Erin and I did a lot of research into my family background. Most of her family came to this country in the last hundred years, so there's not much research to be done on her side, but my family has been here since before dirt, so we got some interesting information. According to an old family legend one of my paternal ancestors was a runaway slave and we found some picture from the mid-19th century that show some relatives of mine with what seems to be obvious African ancestry. Interesting. We also found that one of my ancestral grandmothers was arrested in Massachusetts in 1692 on charges of being a witch. She was eventually released, but you're never sure if you want that kind of information to get out. My ancestors on that side came over from England 14 generations ago, not on the Mayflower in 1620, but on a later ship to Plymouth Colony called the Anne in 1623. 14 generations to go around 350 years. According to Matthew, it took 14 generations to go the 400 years from King David to the exile in Babylon and another 14 generations to go the 500 years from Babylon to Jesus. Fourteen seems to be an important number for Matthew. He also says it took 14 generations to go from Abraham to David. That's a bit of a stretch that it took only 14 generations to traverse that period of at least 850 years. And we know that he left out some generations in this period to make his point of 14. Why is 14 important?

Some of you know that in Matthew's time numerology was important. In many ancient languages, Hebrew included, the same characters were used for numbers as were used for letters. They didn't have separate characters for 1 or A, 2 or B, like we do. They would write the same character for A as for the number 1. The only way you would know as a reader would be the context of what you were reading. Therefore everyone's

name had a numerical value, since it was made up of numerical characters as well as letters. And the name David has the numerical value of 14. The rabbis of Matthew's time loved this kind of numerical tinkering and Matthew's Jewish Christian audience would have caught on immediately that Matthew's point is that Jesus is not only of the Davidic line, but this series of 14s make him very significant. Matthew is beginning his argument that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the one from the line of David who would save Israel.

Genealogies tell us about our history, but do they tell us about our identity? Does it make a difference to me that 14 generations ago, some ancestors of mine came over to the Plymouth Colony? It's kind of interesting, but I don't know that it makes a big difference to who I am today. What difference did this genealogy make to Matthew's readers? Couldn't Jesus have been the Son of God from some other family? Well, the prophets had predicted that the Messiah would come from the line of David, so that is important, but there is something else strange about this genealogy that is important to Matthew's readers. There are four women mentioned in this genealogy. Women were almost never mentioned in something like this. Who one's mother was really didn't matter as long as it was well established who one's father was. Signs of a patriarchal society, I know, but that's the way it was in those days. But this genealogy mentions four women. First is Tamar who had children by her father in law Judah, Jacob's son. Then there is Rahab the harlot, then Ruth the Moabitess who was great-grandmother of King David. And finally there is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite with whom David had an affair, whose husband he had killed and who he eventually married and became the mother of Solomon.

It is strange enough to mention women in one's genealogy, but even stranger to mention women who, except perhaps for Ruth, had sort of a shady past. Mentioning these women and their sexual immorality is far worse than mentioning my ancestral grandmother who was arrested as a witch. And to add insult to injury, all of these women were foreign. They are not Jewish. Why would Matthew mention them when he is trying to establish that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah? Doesn't this undercut his Jewishness?

Perhaps, but Matthew is making a point again. Remember the reading from the prophet Isaiah? "In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and . . . all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways." All the nations, many peoples. Matthew is beginning even now to proclaim that yes, Jesus has come as the Jewish Messiah of the line of David, but he has come, as the prophet proclaimed, for all the peoples and all the nations. God had a purpose in using Gentile women. God's son was coming to save not just those of the house of Israel, but all people.

Through this whole genealogy, God is the actor behind the scenes. It has been said that sometimes God is best known in memory and that is certainly true in our lives as we look back at the things we've been through in our lives and, although we did not perceive it at the time, now we look back and see how God has led us through our lives. Can't the same be true of God's activity across the generations? God led the people of Israel through their long years of slavery in Egypt, and after 400 years brought them out to the Promised Land. God guided them through judges, priests and kings, and even

during their generation in exile in Babylon. Matthew's point in delving into the genealogy of Jesus is to proclaim that all of the history of Israel has been leading up to this point, the birth of this child in Bethlehem. And the word of his birth is going out now not just to the house of Israel who has been waiting for him through long generations but also to a waiting world who although they did not know it, has been part of the preparation through those same long generations.

This is not what anyone expected. The Jews were expecting a king like David. The Gentiles saw greatness in the Roman Empire and the teachings of Plato and Aristotle, and neither of them expected that their world would be changed by the birth of a child in a small town on the frontier of that great empire. This was not what they were praying for. But one of the things we learn from looking through this genealogy is that whether it is in Israel's history or ours, God does not do things the way we expect. Answers to our prayers do not always come the ways we want them to. Perhaps the greatest saint of the first millennium of the church was St. Augustine who grew up in Carthage in North Africa. He was the son of a devout Christian woman named Monica. Like any smart young man in Carthage, Augustine wanted to go to Rome and his mother, fearing the big city, did not want him to go. Monica prayed constantly, "Not to Rome, with its paganism and godlessness, not to Rome O Lord, please." But then Augustine deceived his mother by telling her that he wanted to visit a friend down at the harbor in Carthage. But she was a pretty smart lady, so she offered to go along. Augustine protested that of course she shouldn't go and be exposed to all those sailors and dock workers who might say anything and she should really take herself to the nearby Chapel of St. Cyprian and pray while he was gone. So she did, and while she prayed for her son

to stay in Carthage, the ship sailed to Rome, with Augustine on it. But it was when he got to Rome, yes with all the paganism and loose living that Monica feared, that Augustine happened to walk by a monastery wall over which he heard the voice of St. Ambrose reading aloud from the Bible. And it was that hearing of the reading of scripture by a saint that began the events that led to Augustine's faith and the creation of another saint. God did not answer Monica's prayer the way she wanted, but as Augustine later wrote, "But thou in thy hidden wisdom did give her the substance of her desire." This genealogy is an example of God's hidden wisdom. Who could have known that God was working this way?

Just so in our lives, we go through difficulties, things we would rather not do, rather not see, but when we come out on the other side, we see that God has been working through our faults, our mistakes, our sometimes prideful decisions, and working it all to surprise and show his grace and love in the midst of it all.

Sometimes we have an easier time thinking about how God works through circumstances than through families. Because I have an ancestral grandmother who was arrested for witchcraft because a neighbor did not want to have to pay a debt that he owed, does that make me more sympathetic to those concerned for justice and those unjustly imprisoned? Because I have an ancestor who was an escaped slave, does that make me aware of concerns of people of color, because the DNA which gave her color is part of my DNA? I have ancestral grandparents who came to this country for reasons of religious freedom. I have an ancestral grandfather who fought in the Revolution, though not very long, and another who fought with the 23rd Michigan Infantry in the Civil War and died years later

of wounds received in that war. I have grandparents who lost their farm up in Montcalm County during the Great Depression. What is God teaching me through those things? What is he teaching you through your history, through your genealogy, through the family that you live with today?