

From Generation to Generation: There's Room For Every Story

Matthew 1:1-17

Jeff Marian

The ancient art of tapestry weaving reached its pinnacle in 17th century France. There, large, brilliant tapestries were woven into stunning wall hangings which can still be seen in museums around the world. These tapestries begin with an artist's drawing. Huge looms are then prepared while individual threads are dyed just the right color to match the artist's picture. Then the slow and meticulous process of weaving begins, each thread added in precisely the right place to bring the artist's drawing alive. Some of these tapestries take years to create. On their own, the threads aren't much, but woven together by skillful hands these tapestries are masterpieces. Hold on to that image as I read today's Scripture reading from Matthew, chapter 1. But before I read it I want to say two things about it. And if you were here for our Thanksgiving service on Wednesday evening, this is going to sound familiar! First, this is probably not a reading you would expect for the first week of Advent. And second, it contains a lot of names and I'm going to practice what I learned in seminary...that if you just pronounce biblical names with confidence no one will know if you're saying them right or not!

Our reading comes from portions of Matthew chapter one. Matthew writes,

This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of David and of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.... Obed was the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon (whose mother was Bathsheba, the widow of Uriah). Solomon was the father of Rehoboam.... Eliud was the father of Eleazar. Eleazar was the father of Matthan. Matthan was the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Mary gave birth to Jesus, who is called the Messiah. This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Nothing says "Advent" like a good biblical genealogy, right? Ever start reading a book and after the first chapter you're so bored, so uninspired that you never even start chapter two? Well, when it comes to reading the Bible is there anything more boring and uninspiring than a genealogy? Why in the world does Matthew start the story of Jesus, the Messiah, with a genealogy?

Well, believe it or not, to Matthew's Jewish audience a genealogy was anything but boring. A genealogy determined the property you owned, the possessions you inherited, your rank within your family and tribe and even your political power if you were entitled to any. And genealogies back then did what genealogies do today – they tie the thread of our lives into the larger tapestry of our family history.

Every family genealogy is like a tapestry weaving together bright and beautiful threads, along with some frayed and broken threads. And that's true of Jesus' genealogy as well. Woven into Jesus' family history are some remarkable people. People like Abraham, father of the faith who left his family and his homeland and followed God's into the unknown. The one who was blessed to be a blessing to others. People like David, the greatest King in Israelite history, conqueror of Goliath and a man after God's own heart. Other kings like Hezekiah and Josiah, are included, kings renowned for their faithful leadership of the nation of Israel. There were, no doubt, great women in Jesus' lineage, but unfortunately a patriarchal society didn't give them much recognition. And there are also some frayed and broken threads in the tapestry of Jesus' genealogy. People like Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute. Ruth, a Moabite. And Ahaz, a king of Israel who built idols of metal and sacrificed even his own children to false gods.

And here's what's interesting about all that. There are names that have been left off of Jesus' genealogy, it would seem, intentionally. So why does Matthew go out of his way to include these less-than-stellar individuals in Jesus' genealogy? You would think that these are the people who would have been left out. Sweep it under the rug. Keep the family skeletons in the proverbial closet. But

Matthew doesn't. Why? I think that Matthew is trying to confess two things. First, Jesus identifies completely with our brokenness, with our sin and our failures. His own roots go down into the soil of human sin and brokenness. Second, God can weave every life, every thread into the tapestry of God's good work in the world. I think that's what Paul meant in his letter to the Romans when he said that God causes all things to work together for good. And what's true in Jesus' genealogy is true in our own, isn't it? We all have some stellar fruit and some rotten apples on our family tree, right? One of my relatives was a popular president of Peru...twice! That's pretty awesome. But another relative on the same side the family made his fortune selling slaves. Not so awesome. Both threads run through the tapestry of my family, and I'll bet that's true for your family tapestry.

But here's the deeper truth. The tread of our lives is not either good or bad. We are both. We are, in one moment, brilliant and luminous and loving, and in the next moment we are petty and impatient and mean-spirited. Or, as Martin Luther put it, we are both saint and sinner. That's the truth of our lives. And God knows it. And God, by grace, weave us into the warp and weft of sacred history anyway. If you look at the back side of a tapestry, it's hard to discern what the picture or pattern is. You'll see lots of loose threads and lots of knots, but not much that you'd describe as beautiful. And so often, that's how we see life, isn't it? It so often seems like a tangled, chaotic mess. But faith dares us to believe that God sees more. Faith dares us to believe that God takes the tangled mess of our lives and does something beautiful with it, even if we can't see it in the moment. So, let me offer you a word of encouragement and a word of challenge as we enter into this Advent season.

First, a word of encouragement. No matter what's happening in your life today, know that the thread of your life has been woven into the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Sure, there may be lots of knots in your family tapestry and nuts in your family tree. Yes, the thread of your life might seem dull or frayed today. But know that the golden thread of God's love and grace is woven into you, into the

tapestry of your life in a way that redeems it all, making it into something beautiful. Neither your past nor your present define you. God's grace and love, revealed in Jesus, define you.

Second, a word of challenge. A genealogy locates us in the flow of those who have gone before us. In so many ways our lives are shaped and our stories are informed by those who have gone before us, for better and sometimes for worse. And our faith and our values are passed from generation to generation. And therein lies the challenge. A genealogy also reminds us that generations will follow us and their lives will be shaped and their stories will be informed by our lives. Our faith and our values will be passed along as an inheritance to the generations that follow us. What they do with that inheritance will be up to them. What we pass along is up to us. All of which raises questions like, "What am I passing along? And how am I passing it on?"

So, let me give you a little homework as we move into this Advent season. I don't know about you, but I would love to know whether my great-grandparents were people of faith, and if they were, why did faith matter to them? That would tell me something important about my roots. So, let me challenge you to join me in writing a writing a letter to someone who will be a part of your family tapestry in 150 years. Address it to "Dear Future Generations, here's why my faith matters to me." And go from there. Maybe your faith matters because it reminds you that you're loved and never alone. Maybe your faith matters because it connects you to the larger family of God. Or maybe your faith matters because it teaches you how to live today and assures you of life beyond this life. Whatever it is, write it down. Then date it, put it in an envelope and keep it with your important papers. Who knows who will read it well into the future.

And as we move through this Advent season together, let's give thanks that we have been woven into the tapestry of God's family. That genealogy I read from Matthew's Gospel? You're in it now. I'm in it now. We are in it as beloved children of God, inheritors of God's amazing love and grace.