

I BELIEVE IN LOVE: DARING RIGHT RELATIONSHIP

The genealogy of Jesus. What a weird way to start a story, isn't it? All those names? Not exactly exciting story telling, is it. Not something you would linger over, savor, roll around on your tongue. It's certainly not a reading you would like me to ask you to read, is it? Which is why people hardly preach on passages like this.

But these genealogies are scattered all over scripture; these who-begat-whom lists of names. It reminds me of a friend I meet while living in Kentucky. Someone's name would come up and they would ask "Who's his mama? It was all about where you came from. It's who your people are.

Matthew is telling a story, here, he really is. It's the story of Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, and it's important for people to know where he came from. Who his people are. His credentials, his lineage. That's what these long lists spell out.

Matthew does it with a story teller's flourish – three sets of names, with fourteen generations each. "Fourteen" is kind of a magic number in Hebrew scripture. "7" is a number of wholeness, even holiness – think of the seven days of creation. and 14, well, it's twice as good as seven. So fourteen generations from Abraham till you get to King David, then fourteen from David to the Exile to Babylon, then fourteen more till Jesus, the Messiah. He is the end result of all this perfection.

Except for the bits that aren't so perfect...we'll come back to that in a minute.

It starts out with Abraham, of course, the great-great-grandfather of God's people. In the Exodus story we heard the phrase, "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" over and over again. It was Jacob and his family who went down to Egypt in the first place. It's the Exodus story that takes their descendants back to the Promised Land, until, finally they have their own kind, the best one being David. So Abraham to David, fourteen generations.

Matthew's readers had grown up Jewish and they would have known most of these names already. And those names would have brought up memories. When someone said, "Solomon was the father of Rehoboam they would remember his wealth and his wisdom. And the name Rehoboam would bring to mind his military ambitions, his stubbornness, his troubled reign.

The list of names goes on and on, some famous, some not as well known, but many of them, calling forth well loved and often told stories.

Which is why what Matthew does in this genealogy is so provocative. It's hard for us to see it – most of these names mean nothing to us. But there are five women's names in this list. Almost all the names are men – in a patriarchal culture, it's the fathers who are listed. But there are five women's names in Jesus' lineage. And not just any women. Five troubling women...Let me tell you a little about their stories.

The first one is Tamar. Judah had twin sons by Tamar, it says. Now Tamar is a story you don't tell at the Thanksgiving table. More like at a bar after you've done a couple of shots.

See, I don't know if you know this, but Tamar was Judah's daughter in law. That's right, his daughter-in-law. Let that sink in. Of course, Tamar's husband had died by then, so it wasn't like she was still married.

Actually, that was part of the problem. After Tamar was widowed, her father-in-law Judah was supposed to let her marry one of his other sons. Somebody was supposed to step up to support her, and it should be family, - the next of kin. And Judah hadn't done right by her. So Tamar took things into her own hands.

She found out Judah was going to be in her neighborhood, but she knew she couldn't confront him directly. That would go nowhere. So she disguised herself as a prostitute. He had no idea who she was. She even made him hand over his signet – his personal seal – until he sent a lamb as payment. Well, afterwards, she disappeared and he couldn't get his signet back. Three months later, Tamar shows up pregnant and hands over Judah's signet. I guess he had to take care of her then. "Judah had twin sons by Tamar." Yeah, that's not the half of it.

I bet some of you didn't know that story.

And she's not the only name Matthew drops like a bomb. The second woman he names is Rahab. Rahab turns up when the Israelites are trying to get into Canaan – the Promised Land – right after Moses died. They weren't sure what they were getting into, so Joshua sent two spies to scope it out. When they snuck into the city, Rahab helped keep them safe. You may not have heard of Rahab either, but Matthew's first readers would have known. She was a Canaanite, for crying out loud. She wasn't even a Hebrew! Oh, and she happened to be a prostitute. "Rahab the harlot," they called her.

Now why would Matthew bring her up?

The third woman he mentions is Ruth. You've probably heard of Ruth, she has a whole book written about her. She was another foreigner – a Moabite, she ended up in Israel because he followed her mother-in-law back after they were both widowed. She could have stayed in Moab and married again, but she was loyal to Naomi so she went with her.

It was a risk – no pension, no support services in those days. You had to depend on family, and Ruth didn't have any. But they were resourceful, those women. Naomi helped Ruth figure out how to seduce her relative Boaz so he would marry her. Apparently it worked. Ruth was King David's grandma.

The fourth woman has no name, just the wife of Uriah. What a way to put it. You know her better as Bathsheba. The great King David, taking someone else's wife. When he got her pregnant he tried to cover it up by bringing Uriah back from battle and giving them a little time together. But Uriah wouldn't leave his troops so David did something really low – he sent Uriah

to the front line where he was sure to be killed. When Uriah died, then King David married Bathsheba. And Bathsheba eventually had Solomon. That's some story.

Tamar who tricked her father-in-law; Rahab, the harlot; Ruth, seducing Boaz, Bathsheba, someone else's wife.

Then the fifth woman. Mary, the mother of Jesus. Why would Matthew start his story out this way?

Because Jesus' story starts out with scandal too. Mary and Joseph are engaged, and Mary turns up pregnant. Joseph knows he isn't the father. That's where this story goes next...It's like Matthew's going out of his way to say, you know, this pedigree isn't some blue-blood, pure-blood thing. You don't need to do ancestry.com to find the skeletons in this closed. I'll point them out to you.

It's messy, isn't it? God's work in this world is always in the messy reality of families, with all our complicated stories. Jesus is the Son of God – but absolutely human too. Born into a messy, complicated family, with messy, complicated lives. He is from Jesse's lineage – but there is so much more to the story and Matthew insists that we know it. Jesus' life grew out of a very human past, with villains and saints and heroes, and even courageous women whose stories need to be told.

Jesus is the product of a historical line up of generations and will be the sign that God is with us into the future trials because God was with us through all those generations.

We see Joseph's radical love in a situation that gave him every reason to walk away. The Messenger version of our scripture for this morning says "Don't be afraid to do the hard thing here...there's a big payoff for humanity in it.

Jesus seemingly illegitimate birth and humble beginnings could have squashed the message forever. What do we miss out on when we judge too quickly, dismiss too soon? Deeper love requires longer listening times, suspending judgment, taking our time, being with each other in the ways that "God with us" came in human form to get up close and deeply personal.

As we move through the days of this season of Advent, we are invited to be a people of hope, and peace, and joy and love. We are invited to be a people of wonder-filled amazement seeking and seeing God's in-breaking all around us. Upon learning of Mary's pregnancy, Joseph who we know to be a faithful and righteous man, wanted to get back to his regular ways of living. Wanted to get back to where things make sense, where they were cut and dry, simple and straightforward and so not wanting to upset things, he planned to dismiss Mary quietly. But if we are paying attention, we will find that God's love will not be so easily dismissed.

For me, the point of the story is that in the gift of God's love we receive in the birth of the Christ child is the gift of a kind of love that crosses barriers and defies predictable outcomes. This kind

of love simultaneously holds us to a higher standard of who we are called to be, and also, offers grace upon grace when we inevitably fail to achieve this higher calling.

Remember, Joseph and Mary were not chosen because of their perfection, but because of their genuine humanity. Their love for each other, their love for the unborn child in their midst, their love for Jesus following his birth. Love! It has real, material consequences for their lives and the lives of others.

The leap of faith at the center of the Christmas story isn't how Mary came to be pregnant but that God has chosen again and again to partner with humanity. That while God can and has and does work through people in power, more often than not, that's not where God starts. God starts with people like Mary and Joseph, people like you and me and yes even Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba and Ruth.

The simple gift of God's love reborn at Christmas is God's promise to be with us exactly as we are. Not as we know we should be, or are trying to be on our better days, not as we have promised to be in the darkness of night when we are at the end of our rope, not as we will be some day.....God is with us as we are right now.....today, in this moment. Maybe that's the promise at the heart of this passage – that as God came before to be with us, to use, accept and consecrate Joseph and Mary at the birth of Jesus, just as God comes to us in Christ to be with us, use us for good, accept us as we are and consecrate us for God's work in the world.

Yes, God is really with us. God is with us, really and truly as we are. This is our Emmanuel. Love made flesh showing us, teaching us, walking us into a new life and a new way of living. May you know God's love during these days of Advent. And may you be prepared to receive God's love when it arrives wrinkly and helpless wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. Amen.