

Family Baggage on Display

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Matthew 1:1-17

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Think about this: if you were going to introduce the most significant figure in our lives and in the life of the world, might you want to shoot off fireworks or do something magical right at the beginning to get everyone's attention. Instead, Matthew launches into a detailed account of Jesus' lineage and family tree. Imagine the opening credits to Star Wars with the moveable type starting front and center and moving into the background and basically Matthew does that but does so with Jesus' obscure family tree which includes Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but also Amminadab, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, Jehosaphat, and on and on. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown reminds us that throughout church history this scripture passage would show up occasionally usually in Advent around December 17, and we have it here only because we have been following the theme of 'from generation to generation' this Advent and what a better way to do so than tracing the generations of Jesus' own genealogy. Brown reminds us that this genealogy that opens Matthew's gospel would usually begin the pre-Christmas gospel readings and was used more often prior to liturgical renewal in the 1960's, but when it was used, it would lead to 'disastrous results as the priest-celebrant stumbled over names and sometimes skipped large sections, under the pretense that the reading was a boring and meaningless exercise.' Brown adds that he has been trying to rehabilitate the use of this text on a Sunday during Advent and always feels pleased at the 'stunned look on the faces of the parish [congregation] when launching into the solemn list of begettings'—which is exactly his point—'attention has been caught,' even if the initial impression is one of puzzlement.¹

If our scripture lesson from Matthew is to be taken seriously as an Advent text, then the most realistic Advent in my own family's history occurred a December night some years ago when all seemed calm and all seemed bright, when lunches were being prepared for a last week of school before the Christmas break, maybe even a special Christmas cookie dropped into the lunch boxes for good measure, with happy Hallmark thoughts swirling around and Christmas music playing on the stereo, when from the other end of the house, a younger member of the household came to report that inexplicably the main bathroom was flooded and water was making currently making its way from the bathroom into other quarters of the house. After a half-hour or more of sopping up water with towels and not getting any straight answers on how this could have happened, upon the return trip to the kitchen to finish packing up the lunches, the

¹¹ Raymond E. Brown, *Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year*, 51.

lunch boxes were empty, cleaned out, sandwiches, assorted snacks, and even the Christmas cookies were nowhere to be found, and the only visible evidence and explanation were the eyes of a guilty canine who also had some crumbs of what were once Christmas cookies around his snout; he could not help himself. The Norman Rockwell Christmas scene was taking on water, literally, and in place of visions of sugar plumbs and warm cocoa by the fire, soggy lunch boxes were hastily thrown together, and children were sent off to school with no Christmas cookies and with parents still waiting for answers on how exactly the bathroom flooded.

You might think this genealogy of Jesus to be an equally baffling way to celebrate Advent. But Raymond Brown reminds us that the opening stage and origins of Jesus story do not drop out of the sky from nowhere nor do they have no previous history, but originate with Abraham and Isaac, the story of Israel, Israel's kings and prophets an exiles. As we read through these names, some are simply the generations from Abraham to David to Jesus, the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hopes. But if you were trying to convince everyone that Jesus was the Messiah, there are lots of names here that could just as soon be left off. And it is almost like Matthew goes out of his way not to leave them out and even to call our attention to them. There is Jacob who tricks his father Isaac out of Esau's blessing, there is Judah who sold his brother Joseph into slavery, there is Tamar whose place in the genealogy happens through inappropriate means and incestual dysfunction. It does not end there.

Matthew lists off some others that any self-respecting editor and person trying to persuade us that Jesus was the Messiah would just leave out. There is Rahab the harlot, mother of Boaz, a Canaanite and not a pure Israelite, who helped the Israelites prevail in Jericho. There is Ruth, a Moabite, a non-Israelite, whose yet whose obedience beyond such boundaries incorporate her into the story of Israel and use her faithfulness to lead to Israel's fulfillment in Christ. Nevertheless, Jesus' genealogy is littered with women of questionable repute and his lineage includes a laundry list of people with known flaws and lots of baggage. It is not one oversight here where a rogue relative got slipped in by mistake, but rather generation after generation in this genealogy includes people we would quietly ease out of the story and airbrush out of the picture.

Sure, we might miss a generation here and another generation there, but how in the world are we going to persuade anyone that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with Us, the divine life in human form, the Messiah of Israel, with this kind of collection of characters. It's embarrassing. It's beneath him. We need to produce a pristine pedigree if we are going to convince anybody that Jesus is legit, and Matthew instead offers us a highly questionable family tree. Perhaps it is an oversight. And yet Matthew seems to be going out of his way to include all these people in Jesus family tree. And it is way too many people to be a mistake. He is probably doing it on purpose. As Raymond Brown reminds us: 'Matthew's genealogy is telling us that the story of Jesus Christ contains as many

sinner as saint and is written with the crooked lines of liars and betrayers and immoral, and not only with the straight lines.²

And it is very much in your face and up front from the beginning. What does it mean to be righteous? That is the question Matthew seems to be putting front and center right from the beginning. Matthew's community was struggling to get it and perhaps it is one that still nips at our heels too. What does it mean to be righteous? It is being born into the right family? Having the right pedigree? Jesus' genealogy gives us mixed results for sure. Well, how about always doing what is right, always upholding the law, always making the right choices, and doing good? Again, Jesus' family tree seems to call that kind of righteousness into question too. In the words of author Marilynne Robinson, 'however sound our credentials might seem, we have it on good authority that the prostitutes and sinners might well enter heaven before us.' And I would have to say that the one communicating Jesus' genealogy to us would have to agree. And perhaps this genealogy is showing us from the very beginning how God has been at work rewriting our understanding of what it means to be righteous, using people scattered throughout scripture and our own lives we would just as soon right off or leave out. Instead, God finds a way to use them all to bring Jesus into the world. A scary thought...what a fragile thread the whole operation is running on when you think about it. Entrusting this extraordinary grace to non-Israelites, roguish rulers who manipulate mistresses and have their husbands snuffed out, to women of questionable repute, to prophets and kings and exiles, mixed family baggage at best that is put on full display. Far from being immaculate representatives of the values of God, we get a family tree that is far from even our most generous ways of defining righteousness.

Matthew wants to connect Jesus to Israel, but at this very beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, shows us that the One who proclaimed the kingdom of God to tax collectors and sinners, also had his share of them in his own lineage, that the One who healed the sick and infirm and those struggling with demons we cannot imagine, also has a few unwell and demon possessed in his own family tree. That the One who came to serve those not who were already righteous or who had the inside track to eternal life, but who lived and died for us while we were still sinners, was also brought into the world by a pretty noteworthy collection of them, too.³ So back to that December evening not as long ago where we left off with a soggy bathroom floor and a dog with peanut butter hiding in plain sight on his whiskers. What make such happenings more than tragedies are the same things that make Jesus' genealogy more than a collection of less than stellar specimens and nothing more. Advent is not about being pristine and put together. It is about what God is able to do with flawed human beings and fouled up circumstances. It

² Raymond E. Brown, *Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year*, 54.

³ Raymond E. Brown, *Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year*, 54.

means that Jesus' genealogy is not just a laundry list or a list of names to connect back to Israel, but is good news. Perhaps the genealogy of Jesus is not just what we find in these pages, but what we find in this room. A collection of people who cannot paper over our righteousness any more than Matthew can paper over this family tree, yet a flawed family genealogy that God is able to turn this world around as it finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Perhaps a God who is able to make use of such lineage and give us Jesus, might be able to work with our own mixed bags and crooked family trees and make use of rowdy and flawed characters like us, not so we will have a perfect Christmas and pristine lives, but so that we will bear witness in and through our flawed lives, to the One who comes to transform us and give us a role to play in his story, even when we prefer to remove our names or write ourselves out. By grace, God finds a way to make use of us baggage and all, from the beginning, and until his kingdom comes. Amen.