

Airing the Family's Dirty Laundry

Matthew 1:1-17

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 23, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

²Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, ⁴and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, ⁷and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, ⁸and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, ⁹and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ¹⁰and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, ¹¹and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

¹²And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

¹⁷So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations. (Matthew 1:1-17, NRSV)

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I've got a friend who says that if a book doesn't grab him in the first 50 pages he puts it down for good. Some people would say he's being generous. It's

common knowledge in literature that you want to captivate your reader from the opening lines. That very first sentence, in fact, ought to leave the reader wanting more. The best beginnings all have one thing in common: they all make you want to see the story through to the end.

See if you can identify the stories that began with these captivating first lines:

"Call Me Ishmael." (*Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville)

"It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen." (*1984*, George Orwell)

"All children, except one, grow up" (*Peter Pan*, J.M. Barrie)

"Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure." (*The Stranger*, Albert Camus)

"Where's Papa going with that axe?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast." (*Charlotte's Web*, E.B. White)

"Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much." (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's/Sorcerer's Stone*, JK Rowling)

"Every Who Down in Whoville Liked Christmas a lot...But the Grinch, Who lived just north of Whoville, Did NOT!" (*The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, Dr. Seuss)

The words from Matthew we just read together are the opening words of what many have said is unquestionably the greatest story ever told, made especially great because it's a true story. But who begins their story with a genealogy? Who thinks that the way to captivate readers is to start off with a long list of names? It reads like a phonebook. Yet this is how the New Testament begins. This is Matthew chooses to begin the Christmas story! I bet this isn't your favorite part of the Christmas story. No star. No wise men. No shepherds. No manger. Imagine Linus reciting these words on stage in Charlie Brown's Christmas: "**Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of**

Jotham...” Merry Christmas! It’s every worship assistant’s nightmare!

This morning I want us to see here what we may not yet see. In its time, this was a brilliant opening, the most captivating opening possible. Remember that in ancient and less individualistic days, family was everything. Your identity and your culture had everything to do with your family and your ancestry. The slogan of Ancestry.com, the modern website that helps people discover their heritage, is “Build a family tree and watch your story emerge.” If we have some sense of this being true even today, it was absolutely true back then. In the ancient world your story was all wrapped in in the names of those who came before you. It’s why people would memorize these genealogies and pass them down generation after generation.

In a way, your genealogy back then was like your résumé today. And in the same way we might selectively polish our résumés today, families then would often only include in their genealogies the noteworthy or admirable names. It’s a little like those Christmas letters and family photos we send out this time of year. I don’t know anybody who includes the less-than-flattering parts of their past year in those letters. “Merry Christmas! It’s been quite a year. I’m struggled a lot with my addiction to pornography this year. Our marriage has grown cold and distant since last Christmas. Our son’s life is an absolute wreck. Hope all is well with you. Oh, and here’s a picture of our grandkids, the little angels...” We put on our best face.



Similarly, in ancient Israel you wanted your genealogy to shine because then you would shine. This was *your* story emerging here. In fact, Jews in those days put the greatest possible value on the purity of one’s lineage. For instance, if there was even the slightest mingling of non-Jewish blood in your background, you could lose your right to be called a Jew. Think of how much the Jews hated the Samaritans, these people whose Jewish ancestors had intermarried with Assyrians. Jews called them ‘dogs’ and ‘half-breeds’. A priest in Jesus’ day, if he were to serve as a priest, had to demonstrate an unbroken pedigree that stretched all the way back to Aaron.¹ Add to all this the fact that Israel was hyper-conscious that God had made promises to them about a Messiah who would one day come through the family

line, through Abraham, and through David, and you begin to see that the way Matthew begins the story was, for the Jews of that time, the most natural, the most interesting, and indeed the most essential way to begin the story.

The whole thing starts off wonderfully. Every Jew who read Matthew’s Gospel would have been hooked by the first line: **“An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”** Wow! You could not pack more into a first sentence. The first words, in the original Greek, literally read, “The book of the generations...” That root word for ‘generations’ is the word ‘genesis’. This goes deep, all the way back to the beginning.

Remember, God had first made his covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12, that through Abraham’s seed God would one day bless an entire nation through which all nations would in turn be blessed.² God later declared that it would be specifically through the royal line of David, Israel’s greatest king, that this blessing would come in the form of *the greatest* King, a messianic King, who would rule on the throne forever. In II Samuel 7:16 God promises David, **“Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.”**³ When the Messiah arrived, therefore, the one who would bless all nations, he would be identified by the fact that he was a descendant of Abraham through David. Think of how many times in the Gospel accounts, in fact, people wonder if this Jesus from Nazareth is, in fact, from David’s line. After Jesus once heals a man who was blind and mute, the crowds wonder aloud, **“Can this be the Son of David?”**⁴

So, yes, every Jew who sat down to read this story would have been hooked from the opening line, eager then to read the names of the genealogy which followed, fully expecting that if this Jesus truly was the Messiah, his lineage would demonstrate the most pristine pedigree of all.⁵

² See Genesis 12:1-3

³ NRSV

⁴ Matthew 12:23 (NRSV)

⁵ Commentator Dale Bruner points out how the overarching narrative of the genealogy is like a giant leaning “N”. 14 generations upwards in history from Abraham to David (Israel forged into a people, a nation, finally recognized in the world under David, their greatest king). 14 generations plummeting downward in history from King Solomon to the Babylonian exile (a chapter of Israel’s shame, tragedy and disaster). 14 generations back upwards in history from the Exile to Christ (ultimately liberated in the Messiah,

¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study Series: The Gospel of Matthew*, Volume 1 (Westminster Press, 1975), 12.

And so it begins with the highest of expectations.

“Abraham was the father of Isaac,”

Of course it begins with Abraham. These are the headwaters. And Abraham was indeed a great and faithful man, the patriarch of Israel. But if you know his whole story, including the parts of the story he likely didn't include in his annual Christmas letter, he was also a man who was willing to turn his wife over to other men for sexual favors in order to save his own skin. His first son was born after he impregnated his wife's maid. Worse, he later banished this woman and his son to wander in the desert. This is where the family tree of Jesus begins.

“and Isaac the father of Jacob,”

You remember Jacob, right? His name literally means “supplanter” because he grasped the heel of his twin brother on his way out of the womb. He lived up to his name, a schemer his whole life. He even schemed his blind, old father and his older brother out of his brother's inheritance. When all was said and done, he had twelve sons by two wives and their two maids and ended up playing favorites with one of his sons to such an extent that seeds of bitterness and division were sown in his own family. This is the family of Jesus.

“and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,”

Judah and his brothers got so jealous of their favored brother, Joseph, they sold him into slavery at Judah's suggestion, and covered his clothes with the blood of a goat to deceive their father into thinking he was mauled to death by a wild animal.

“and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar,”

Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law who, having been lied to and neglected by Judah after she was twice widowed, seduced her father-in-law to have sex with her without him knowing who she was. Judah didn't know he was committing incest, but only thought he was sleeping with a prostitute. Merry Christmas!

“and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon

Christ, from their slavery – rescued them from disaster...turned tragedy into triumph). Up in mercy. Down in judgment. In by faith. See *Matthew: A Commentary*, Volume 1 (Eerdmans, 2004), 7.

the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab,”

Speaking of prostitutes. Remember Rahab? Not only was she a prostitute, but she was a foreign woman betrayed her own people to save her skin when Israel invaded Jericho. And though in our ignorance we might read past all this – just another strange name in a strange list – any Jew reading this would have choked on his bagel when he got to this name. A regular form of Jewish prayer in those days included this line: “Lord, thank you that you did not make me a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.” Here we have two out of three in Rahab, and she's just the first in this list.

You see, no Jewish genealogy in those days included women. Men only. Women in those days were regarded more as possessions than people, the property of their husbands or fathers. Did you notice that Matthew makes no mention of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah, the model matriarchs of Jewish history? No one would have expected to him to do so; they were women. So how in the world does Rahab get in here? And the next three women we come across in the genealogy are also Gentiles, and three of them are also of questionable moral character. It's almost as if Matthew sat and poured over his Old Testament in an effort to find the most questionable characters possible so that he could insert them into his record. I cannot overestimate how shocking this would have been to Matthew's original audience. A back-stabbing prostitute from the wrong side of the border is included in the family of the Jesus.

“and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth,”

Here we go again. Ruth was a Moabitess, a member of a racial group the Old Testament actually declared should not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.⁶ Yet, here is Matthew including her in the family of the Messiah. As the story goes, Boaz was seduced by this foreigner. He woke up in the middle of the night and basically found her in bed with him.

and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

Finally, here is somebody respectable. Right? David, though the runt of his family became the greatest king Israel ever had, a man after God's own heart, a man who unquestionably served God faithfully in many instances. And yet, here is a man who was also a power-hungry peeping-tom, who inflicted adultery on the wife of man who was, at the time, out on the battlefield where David himself should have been.

⁶ See Deuteronomy 23:3

When Bathsheba, this Hittite woman who was the wife of Uriah, became pregnant, David tried to cover the scandal up by hatching a scheme to have Uriah killed in battle in such a way that made it look like an accident. Oh, and by the way, David himself had at least eight wives.

“And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah,”

Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived. And maybe the richest. He also kept 300 concubines and married at least 700 women in an effort to form as many political alliances as he could. In his later years he turned his heart after the worship of other gods.⁷ It still wasn't enough, however, to expel his name from the family tree of Jesus.

“and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah,”

Scripture tells us that Rehoboam did evil because his heart was not set on God,⁸ and that his son, Abijah, committed every single sin that his father before him had committed.⁹

“and Abijah the father of Asaph,”

Asaph's thirst for power led him to put all his brothers to the sword. He's one of the great grandfathers of Jesus.¹⁰

“and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz,”

Ahaz. Now, here's a relative you can be proud to claim in your family tree. He burned his own son as an offering, following the wretched practices of pagan nations around him.¹¹

“and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh,”

Not to be outdone by Ahaz, Manasseh sacrificed more than one of his sons in fire offerings to false gods. He then went and put an idol in God's Temple in Jerusalem. He practiced sorcery, divination, and witchcraft. You'd think that Matthew might have found a way to edit him out. But there he is.

“and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.”

Is it any wonder that Jerusalem is destroyed after such sustained and horrendous leadership? It is here that we reach the absolute low point of Jewish family history. Thankfully, by the grace of God, the story continues. For the sake of time, let's fast forward to the ending. As I do, don't imagine that the characters next in line make a significantly better name for the family than the ones who came before. It's still a very mixed bag.

“And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel,¹³ and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor,¹⁴ and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud,¹⁵ and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob,¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

And here it culminates: Joseph was the father of Jesus...sort of. He wasn't actually the biological father. At the time of the birth, Mary was only his fiancé, a teenager pregnant out of wedlock. Scandal even surrounded Jesus' very birth. (And you thought your family was messed up! No way! Sit up proud this morning. Your family is doing way better than you thought it was!)

So what do we learn here? First, let me point out that Matthew's genealogy is as much a theological reflection as anything. Jesus' genealogy could have been recorded differently. In fact, if you've read Luke's version you know that it's even recorded differently in the Bible.¹² That doesn't mean it's not accurate. There are many ways I could draw out my family tree as well, depending on how I wanted to trace it back. In the end, Matthew includes these particular names for a reason. *Scripture* includes these particular names for a reason, and does so right at the very beginning of the story! Matthew is making a very, very significant statement here, which sets the tone for what is to follow.

To begin with, when Christ, God's eternal Son, came into the world he did not come floating in on a cloud, walking six feet above the grime of this world, whisked away safely in the end back to the comfort of heaven. The Gospel does not begin with “Once upon a time”. No, Christ came out of and into, deep into, the mess of

⁷ See I Kings 11:4

⁸ See II Chronicles 12:14

⁹ See I Kings 15:3

¹⁰ See II Chronicles 21:4-6

¹¹ See II Kings 16:2-4

¹² See Luke 3:23-38

our world. Jesus is not the stuff of legend, but a flesh-and-blood human who was born into as messed up a family as their ever was. And he did not just come to be near us, but to be *with us, even one of us!* God, in Christ, stands in absolute solidarity with humanity. Jesus comes not to relate only to the best among us, but also to the worst among us and to the worst within us. He's not interested in our polished Christmas card and photo. He knows what lies behind it all, and yet he's not put off by any of it.

The great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, once put it this way, "O, Christ is the kind of person who is not ashamed of sinners – in fact, He even puts them in his family tree!"¹³ And so it makes sense that if the Gospel of Jesus Christ is going to drip with the grace of God, its opening lines must also drip with grace. Indeed they do! Think of the people who get included in Jesus' family! Those excluded by gender or race are included. Those excluded by culture are included. Those excluded by the norms of respectable society are included. Those even excluded by the law of God are included! What does it all mean?

Noted biblical scholar and Catholic priest, Raymond Brown, puts it this way:

The God who wrote the beginnings with crooked lines also writes the sequence with crooked lines, and some of those lines are our own lives and witness. A God who did not hesitate to use the scheming as well as the noble, the impure as well as the pure, men to whom the world harkened and women upon whom the world frowned — this God continues to work through the same [mixed bag].¹⁴

This is personal. This is the heart of Christmas, not just back then but today. Your Christmas letter and family photo do not tell the whole story. Nor should they. That's not a place to air your family's dirty laundry – though it would make for interesting reading! But God sees behind the veneer. He knows it all and yet it doesn't change a thing. It's why Christ came, actually. It's the very point Matthew is making when he draws up Jesus' family tree the way he does and then sticks it right at the front of the story. What can we say about a God who works in and through even the worst of us to bring about his eternal purposes, who includes those in his family nobody would ever imagine should be included? We can at least say this about the heart of God, that it is full of love and grace.

I think of what Paul wrote in his first letter to Timothy: **"The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance,**

that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost."¹⁵ So where do we get the crazy idea that somebody like me, or somebody like him, or somebody like her, doesn't belong in the family of God? We get that idea from one another, never from God. And never from God's Word!

The church, you know, is the extension of God's family. This family tree goes on! And the cast of characters which follow after Jesus has quite a lot in common with the cast of characters that came before, just more knots in the family tree. And do you know who gets included? Anybody who wants to be included! For all who recognize their need of a Savior, who have ultimately found life unmanageable on their own, they are welcome, in faith, to trust Jesus and, in doing so, find themselves, mess and all, grafted into the family tree. Because this baby born to Joseph and Mary went on to live, and die, and rise again, all who want to be included are now invited to be included. No exceptions! And included not just as distant cousins, but as brothers and sisters to our Lord and to one another, and as adopted sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father in line to inherit from him all that Christ himself stands to inherit. You may not now be in the family of God, but you can be!

I John 3:1 declares, **"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are."**¹⁶ In Christ, by grace through faith, *that is what we are!* Apparently what God does is more important than what humans do.

There is, I know, something in you that will not want to believe this is true. It's in me as well. There is a voice, an evil voice, that will show you your life by bringing up all sorts of things in your life that, it says, have kept you out of this family. It will then point to other people around you and say the same thing about them. When that happens, you need to remember the Christmas story. You need to remember *this* Christmas story, the one about Abraham, and Tamar, and Rahab, and David, and Ahaz, and Manasseh, and Joseph and Mary, and the rest. You especially need to remember where it ends up.

"So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations."

42 generations. Jesus is the result of seven generations six times over. In other words, he begins the seventh

¹³ Cited by Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, 11.

¹⁴ Source unknown

¹⁵ I Timothy 1:15 (NRSV)

¹⁶ NRSV

seven of generations. The number seven in scripture always points towards perfection, and wholeness, and completion. On the seventh day of creation God rested because all creation was complete and was, as God put it, very good. In the seventh seven of generations in this family tree, one at last comes along who, in time, will make all things perfect, and whole and complete. Shalom at last.¹⁷

This part of the story here ends where we often think the Christmas story begins, in a manger in Bethlehem. In the next verses we read that child is born, a very ordinary looking child who, we now know, comes from a very mixed bag of ancestors, the best and the worst all mixed together, right down to the parents who wrap him up that night in swaddling clothes.

When some time later some wise men from the east follow a star in search of the child, they stop in Jerusalem to ask directions from King Herod. He doesn't know where to send them but after consulting his own wise men he is reminded that the Messiah, the one who will come to set all things right, will be born in Bethlehem, the City of David.¹⁸ Of course he will. This child is the seed of Abraham sent to be a blessing to all nations, one descended from the royal line of David, a King whose Kingdom shall never end. His pedigree will be glorious and scandalous all at once. But those who will trust him – *all those who trust him* – will some day come to call him family.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Ancestry.com promotes, "Build your family tree and watch your story emerge." How much do those who have come before you in your family determine who you are today?
2. Look at Jesus' family tree by reading Matthew 1:1-17 again. Other than the fact that some of the pronunciation here is terribly difficult, what's your first impression of this passage?
3. Why would Matthew choose to open his Gospel this way? Why would God arrange it so that the entire New Testament opened in this way?

¹⁷ I'm grateful for this insight from *The Life with God Bible* (NRSV), edited by Richard J. Foster, (Harper, 1989), text notes on p. 12.

¹⁸ See Matthew 2:1-6

4. Why does Matthew seem to go to such great lengths to include people in Jesus' family tree nobody would have expected to find included? Does his inclusion of these people weaken or strengthen his case that Jesus is actually the Messiah?

5. Consider the quote from Raymond Brown again. What does this say to you?

The God who wrote the beginnings with crooked lines also writes the sequence with crooked lines, and some of those lines are our own lives and witness. A God who did not hesitate to use the scheming as well as the noble, the impure as well as the pure, men to whom the world harkened and women upon whom the world frowned — this God continues to work through the same mixed bag.

6. After reflecting on this passage and all the people included in Jesus' family tree, one person concluded, "What God does is more important than what humans do." Are you left with the same conclusion?
7. Are you a part of God's family? Why or why not?
8. What good news have you heard here today that you really needed to hear? How will it change you? How can you share it with others?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Who is in Jesus' family? What kind of people are they?