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Matthew 1: 1-17

In this passage, Matthew goes back 41 generations, tracing the birth of Christ to the great Hebrew patriarchs of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to the powerful, wise and triumphant kings of David, Solomon, and Uzziah. Matthew traces this genealogy through the ups and downs of the people of Israel—from being nomadic, to finding the Promised Land, to the very pinnacle of the Hebrew empire, to exile, and eventually to salvation. Biblical scholars often point out that this is the first of several attempts by the writer to insert the Hebrew criteria of the prophesied Messiah into his gospel account.

However, most folks today, when reading this— if they choose to read it at all—might question if 41 generations is really necessary. I know I'm often eager to get to the good stuff: the walking on water, the Beatitudes, the miracles.

Nevertheless, this is how we start the Good News of the Gospel. Sure, it can be boring, cluttered, and quite challenging to read without a stumble or two. And for the most part, I've been satisfied taking it solely for its historical value or "Messiah justification."

However, if we look beyond the historical significance of this passage, a prophetic and pertinent tone begins to ring. I've become a big admirer of Matthew's careful attention to detail and intentionality. The genealogy found in this account serves not only as a genesis of Emanuel, "God with us through Christ," but also as a magnificent portrait of God's sovereignty and divine providence. It is even a glimpse of Jesus' ministry and examples of the radical hospitality we will soon find in the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew's use of the genealogy is not just some sort of shout out to all those who've come before Christ— not just some sort of recognition of Abraham and David! It's an awesome illustration of God's creative participation in our lives. It serves as an example of how the Spirit works in Creation through some of the most powerful

people, yet also through those who are millennia away from equitable pay.

Although Matthew is very careful and intentional in Christ's genealogy, the genealogy itself is very messy. It starts off with Abraham, who's to be a great father of a nation, who has a son Isaac. Although Abraham's blessing was received by Isaac, it didn't come without some complicated family dynamics. Then Isaac had a son, Jacob. Again, Jacob is not the first born, but he received Isaac's blessing through deceit and betrayal. The genealogy continues to one of Jacob's sons, Judah, and the first woman introduced in the genealogy, Tamar. Tamar is a widow and a daughter-in-law of Judah. When Judah refuses Tamar's right to marry another son, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and has a son with Judah. We're just four generations in and we have a great example that there is no straight shot to the Promised Land, but rather one that is turbulent, unpredictable and sometimes even troubling.

According to New Testament scholar, Raymond Brown, “Matthew’s choice of Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau and Judah over Joseph is faithful to the Old Testament insight that God frequently does not choose the best or noble or the saintly.” God’s action is consistently unpredictable—God uses the least expected to carry out God’s plan. Matthew’s genealogy continues to point out unexpected characters by the inclusion of women. After Tamar, we find Rahab. To the world, she’s labeled as a Canaanite, an outsider, an enemy, a prostitute, a spy— nevertheless an agent of the Spirit, a child of God! We find this untraditional charting of ancestry through women again with Ruth the Moabite, a story of a widowed daughter-in-law who refuses to leave the side of her widowed mother-in-law, saying, “Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die.” The devotion of Ruth becomes so inspiring to the Hebrew people that even though she’s an outsider and a woman, her story resides in the Hebrew Scriptures. Ruth goes on to marry Boaz and

they have a son Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David the king. Although we find ourselves in a high point of the people of Israel, the turbulence continues. Although the fourth important woman in this genealogy—Bathsheba—is not mentioned by name Bathsheba's murdered husband is. The gospel writer seems to cleverly hint at the messiness that's often a part of a family tree. This shouldn't surprise us; it's a narrative we find throughout the Old Testament and in Jesus' ministry. It's a narrative that involves power struggles, widows, prostitutes, the sick, and people at the margins of society. It includes some of the most unfaithful and some of the most faithful people of God. The religious elites are dumbfounded and offended by the company this so-called messiah keeps. Jesus' ministry ushers in a new concept of who our brothers and sisters are; Jesus redefines the meaning of the word "family," and teaches his followers that to follow him means to eschew boundaries of any kind—boundaries of class, sex, race, and gender; boundaries of age, education, culture, and tradition.

The genealogy recognizes and honors the tradition, but it ushers in new beginning as well. The gospel writer spends all this time carefully writing out generation-to-generation building up to Christ, only to stop at Joseph. The genealogy ends with, “Matthan was the father of Jacob, Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary of her was the begotten Jesus, called Christ.” Christ represents a new beginning, a new identity, in which we are all brothers and sisters, and these are our roots; the new Covenant. Stan Saunders, one of my professors at Columbia, wrote that, “Matthew understands that Jesus’ identity is the foundation for Christian identity even today.

The genealogy is the beginning of the story of God's new creation coming into being. Jesus embodies God's presence and power among us.” A few verses later, Matthew writes that to fulfill the prophecies, the child shall be called Emanuel, meaning “God With Us.” Jesus was born: into a family with very little political capital left in a time of imperial rule; into a patriarchal heritage that

includes women, outsiders, and entitled sons; into a region of expansive economic inequality; to a teenage mother, who, with her husband and newborn travel to another country because of a dream.

Guided by their faith, Mary and Joseph continue the legacy of their ancestors and God uses God's creation to bring Salvation to God's people.

When I was in undergrad as a psychology major, we spent almost an entire semester debating between nature versus nurture. We would exchange ideas and theories, case-studies and data. When we got to the end of the class, however, we entirely agreed that both are equally important. The professor laughed at us because she said that the very same thing happened every semester.

This story is a reminder that God not only creates but also is active in our lives. God creates us and uses each and every one of us. That is why it is very difficult for Christians to go out into the world and separate ourselves from the world—as created beings, we are inextricably bound to one another through our Creator. Matthew's

genealogy narrative is an illustration that Christ breaks down barriers. We are not bound together by the color of our skin, or by our gender—and certainly not by geopolitical borders demarcating one country from the next. We are bound together through Christ.

However, as we see in the narrative of this genealogy, there are struggles when it comes to living together. There is pain and betrayal, frustration and heartache. In this post-inauguration season, when the country feels more divided than ever, wounded by the pain of a hurtful and hateful election season, many people find themselves wondering how to reconnect with people they find on the other side of the political aisle. In the wake of this suffering, we must remember that God calls to us be Bridge Builders—not to force people to think like we do or vote like we do, but to show love, reconciliation, and grace.

Remember, at the end of Matthew's genealogy narrative we have the birth of Christ, the Redeemer. Christ who teaches us to overcome barriers and strife and to live together as one. In Christ

we trust for the power to reach out and reconnect. Christ is with US!

Alleluia! Amen!