

"The Family Tree"

Matthew 1:1-17

First Presbyterian Church of Corpus Christi, Texas
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There's an ancient Chinese proverb that says a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. This morning we are going to take that first step on what will be the most ambitious sermon series I've done so far. Over the next several months we are going to work our way through the entire Gospel of Matthew. That means that if you are in worship every Sunday you will hear all of Matthew read out loud.

It's probably safe to say that no other book of the Bible has shaped the Christian faith more than the Gospel of Matthew. In fact, one historian in the 19th century called Matthew "the most important book ever written."

So before we get to this morning's passage I think it's important for us to get a little background on the book of Matthew. Biblical scholars seem to think that the Gospel of Matthew came together the way we have it no sometime around 70 to 80 A.D. That's less than 50 years after Jesus completed His earthly ministry, maybe as few as 35 years. There would have been plenty of people around who were eye-witnesses of the things that Matthew wrote about and could have corrected him if it was incorrect. That means we really can trust that the Gospel of Matthew is quite accurate.

One of the most important features of this book is its "Jewishness." Matthew was a Jewish Christian writing to Jewish Christians, most likely in the city of Antioch in

Syria. Matthew uses lots of quotes from the Old Testament and he is very interested in fulfilled prophecy, the law, and the traditions of Judaism. One of those traditions was the keeping of genealogical records.

When I was in high school we had to do a project about our family history. We not only had to create a family tree that went back a number of generations, but we had to also make a presentation to the class about one of our ancestors. That project started my intense interest in our family's history. I would spend hours looking through old photographs and documents, reading about various family members.

These days genealogy has become big business. There are a number of services available, for a fee, to help you find your family history. NBC even has a TV series called *Who Do You Think You Are?* where they help celebrities learn about their own family trees. The truth is, however, that for most of us, discovering our roots may be fascinating but it probably won't impact where we can live or work or worship.

But at the time of Jesus, genealogical records, which were maintained by the Sanhedrin, were used to ensure purity of descent. Your ability even to go into certain areas of the Temple depended upon your having the right ancestry. This intense interest in genealogies is one reason Matthew begins his Gospel with the genealogy of

Jesus as a way of proving Jesus' identity. Matthew 1 begins, "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." With this first sentence "Matthew establishes the two most significant points about Jesus' family history: he was a descendant of Abraham, meaning he was a legitimate member of the Jewish nation, and he was a "son of David," meaning he was of royal lineage.

Over time the phrase "son of David" was understood to be a messianic title. It pointed ahead to the coming of the long-awaited Messiah. So what Matthew is really doing here is saying that Jesus is the Messiah that the Jewish people have been waiting for all these years.

This record of Jesus' family is arranged in three divisions of fourteen generations each. Before we look at why it's arranged that way, just think about the amount of time covered by this list. From Abraham to Jesus is almost 2000 years! To put that in perspective, on the Blackshear side of my family, we can trace the line back to about 1505 in England. That's only 500 years.

One of the things to remember about the gospels is that the gospel writers were not trying to write history the way we would today. Matthew was interested in what we could call theological history. As scholars have looked at this list they have discovered that Matthew left out about four of the kings, for example. Why would he do that? What was important to Matthew was that they be

grouped in three sections, and that they have fourteen generations in each. So when it says so-and-so was the father of so-and-so, it may not mean father but more broadly ancestor.

The reason becomes more apparent when we dig into these numbers. In the Bible, the numbers used are often very significant and it's no different here. The name David in Hebrew is made up of three consonants (there are no vowel letters in Hebrew). If you assign numbers to those letters based on where they fall in the alphabet and then add up those numbers you get fourteen. So the numbers three and fourteen represent king David.

The three groups represent the three important eras of Jewish history. The first section is the story of God's people leading up to Israel's greatest king, David. The second section is the story of the decline of the nation, with a number of unfaithful kings, ending in exile in Babylon. The final section is the restoration, climaxing with the advent of the Messiah.

One of the most amazing things about this genealogy of Jesus is that it includes five women. This was written at a time and in a culture when women had no legal rights. They were more or less considered property. A woman's testimony was not considered valid in a court of law. But here in the genealogy of Jesus are the names of these five women.

When we discover who these women were, it becomes even more scandalous. The first one

is in verse 3, "Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar." First of all, Tamar was a Canaanite. She was not Jewish. She was also Judah's daughter-in-law and she seduced Judah and became pregnant. The second one mentioned was Rahab, the prostitute in Jericho who hid the spies sent by Joshua to spy out the Promised Land. Again, wrong nationality and wrong profession. The third mentioned is Ruth, a Moabite. Deuteronomy 23:3 says, "no...Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD."

The fourth woman mentioned is not named, it simply says, "And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah." This, of course, was Bathsheba, the wife of a Hittite. As a result of his lust for her, David committed both adultery and murder. In addition to these women we find mentioned the wicked kings like Ahaz and Manasseh, but also the faithful kings like Hezekiah. This hardly seems like the pure lineage we would expect of the King of kings.

There are three things I want to point out about why we find such shady characters in Jesus' family tree. First of all, looking back we can see how God was in control of all of history so that Jesus was born "in the fullness of time." We call that providence. God is able to use our brokenness and sinfulness as part of His eternal plan. The scandals of these pregnancies in the past prepare us, the readers, for the scandal of the virgin Mary's pregnancy.

Second of all, we see how merciful God has been with His people in the past. We can have great comfort and hope knowing that He will be merciful with us even when we make a mess of our own lives.

And finally, the family history of Jesus reminds us that every one of us is a sinner, separated from God by our sin. Even Jesus' own family needed the redemption that He came to bring. What every one of us needs is a Savior. That's why we celebrate Christmas. We are celebrating the birth of the Messiah, planned and announced by God thousands of years before, that shoot from the stump of Jesse. That was the message to the shepherds and it's the message to us. To us is born a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Amen