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A New Nativity: I. Genealogy and Grace¹

Matthew 1:1-18a NRSV An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, 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 the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, 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, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, 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. And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. 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. Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way....

Don't you think that Carroll Bloomquist deserves a round of applause for having to read that scripture? I'll try to do better the next time he is the scripture Elder and find something like "Jesus wept" instead. We don't usually read this scripture as part of our Advent preparations, do we? And yet Matthew begins his gospel with this genealogy as the beginning of the story of Jesus and we would therefore be wise to not simply skip over it in order to get to what we presume is "the good stuff." In fact, while these first 17 verses of Matthew don't have the drama of Mary's becoming pregnant through the Holy

¹Virtually all modern-day sermons on the genealogy of Jesus owe a debt to Raymond Brown's work on the topic. Cf. The Birth of the Messiah (Doubleday, 1977).

Spirit or of the angel that tells Joseph of this news, and they don't have the charming details of the wise men's visit or the horrible story of Herod's seeking to find Jesus and then killing all the baby boys in Bethlehem, these first 17 verses are an essential prelude to the Christmas story and if we pass over them we miss several crucial things.

Gary Peluso-Verdend, the president of Phillips Theological Seminary, last month wrote an intriguing blog post² in which he invited us to consider all the other people that **could** be in Nativity Scenes that are so iconic this season. Now, we are used to nativity scenes that run together Matthew's story and Luke's stories when we put together the whole cast in our Christmas pageants and Christmas Eve services : Mary and Joseph and the baby, the shepherds the angels and the wise men. But Gary's point is that while we traditionally put all these characters in the same tableau, creating a kind of mash-up of two different stories and conflating months of time into one instant, we don't put some of the other characters into those nativity scenes that are actually just as much a part of the story. For what Matthew is telling us in his genealogy is that Jesus wouldn't be Jesus without these characters. So, in each of the four Sundays of Advent I want to talk about some of the characters that maybe we **should** put in those nativity scenes because of their importance to the story of our faith. Today, then, let's look more closely at this genealogy and its characters in two ways, and we may begin to see why it is truly indeed an essential part of the Christmas story.

First, both Matthew's and Luke's gospels have genealogies but they don't match up. Moreover, while Matthew says that there were 42 generations between Abraham and Jesus, we know from the historical record that there had to be more generations than that. And we also know that in some cases in this long list what the King James Version calls "the begats," Matthew simply leaves some people out that we know were actually part of the biological tree. Matthew also does something rather remarkable for

²<http://ptstulsa.edu/NativitySetUpgradeNeeded>

the typical genealogies of that day and age: he includes women in it. And not just any women, but four remarkable women whose stories range from the lascivious to the lovely – but, as we shall see, their inclusion is not simply a *biological* statement but a key **theological** declaration about the nature of God. The four women named in Matthew’s genealogy are Tamar, Rahab, Bethsheba, and Ruth. Ruth is the lovely, if surprising, story: You recall that Ruth was a foreigner, a Moabite, and Moabites were generally detested by Jews of her day. And yet Ruth, after she is widowed, becomes the wife of Boaz and ultimately the great-grandmother of King David. Matthew’s point in including her is to remind us that good can come from unexpected places and that our nationalisms and the boundaries we put up between people are nothing in God’s eyes. Grace sometimes comes from places and from people we don’t expect. In this genealogy, then, Matthew is reminding us that through Ruth God has shown – and in Jesus now shows again – that God is indeed the God of all people not just the god of one country, one nation, one tribe.

But what of the other women in Jesus’ genealogy? Well, let’s just take one of them, Tamar. Tamar was widowed as a young woman. And in that day and age, it was the responsibility of her deceased husband’s brother to marry her and give her offspring. But her husband’s brother refused to do so. Now, this was serious business. Women without husbands or children had no status in society, and more, importantly, no way to earn a living, no form of Social Security for their golden years, no way to keep themselves alive. Try to imagine the sheer horror of that and you might begin to understand the desperate action Tamar took. She dressed herself as a prostitute and then her dead husband’s father procured her for a night from which she gave birth to twin boys. Not a story you may have ever heard, is it? And as one commentator says: “This is the last story that you would ever want to tell your kids.... Can you imagine the

family reunions?”³

And yet Matthew lists her as part of the ancestry of Jesus. Why? Well, again, Matthew is reminding us here that God’s grace, God’s love, God’s forgiveness is always wider, more mighty, and more universal than we sometimes expect, and that God uses people who are sinful, broken, and hurting to bring about good. Ours is not a prissy and pristine God, only deigning to work through the proper and the perfect. No, the good news is that God can use a Tamar to be a part of the story of Jesus, and God can and will use you and me, imperfect as we too are! For as another commentator says, in this genealogy

You have men, women, adulterers, prostitutes, heroes, and Gentiles. Jesus is Savior of them all. Right from the start, Matthew is telling us that Jesus is immersed in the gritty and seamy side of fallen humanity. No matter who you are, people like you are already part of Jesus’ story. Right from the start, God chooses the most sinful, broken, and unlikely people - people like you and me.⁴ Or, as Martin Luther, founder of Protestantism put it 500 years ago, “Christ is the kind of person who is not ashamed of sinners—in fact, he even puts them in his family tree!”

The second thing I want to note about this genealogy may be even more important. A preacher by the name of Dean Snyder says this:

Genealogy is about much more than biology. The theological truth is that we get thrown into the world with all sorts of circumstances decided for us. We have no control over them. We can’t pick our parents.... We can’t pick our bodies, or our geography of birth, or our social standing. We can’t decide anything about our

³<http://www.preachit teachit.org/articles/detail/tamar-the-scandalous-great-grandmother-of-jesus/>

⁴<http://dashhouse.com/sermons/2011/12/18/the-book-of-the-genealogy-of-jesus-christ-matthew-11-17.htm>
| Martin Luther’s statement is also quoted from this source.

entry into life. So much that we [are] is arbitrarily and mysteriously decided for us.⁵

There is indeed so much that we don't choose about our lives, and so much of it can seem so circumstantial, so capricious, so arbitrary. We have all, of course, been pondering the horror of Friday's awful events. It may seem arbitrary that you or I chose not to go to that King Soopers or Chase Bank yesterday and therefore were not one of those shot by a gun-wielding madman who had decided not to heed Congressman Doug Lamborn's wise reminder that "senseless violence should never be used to settle differences of conscience or political opinion."⁶ It may seem arbitrary that we were born into a country whose leaders refuse to listen to the majority of the nation's people and police chiefs to have the courage take some simple steps to deal with a public health crisis that continues to leave toddlers and churchgoers and police officers dead and families bereft.

And such things can lead us to ask "Why am I here?" "Who am I, really?" "What do the circumstances and accidents of my birth and life mean, if anything?" In the face of such questions, too many are too likely to respond either that life has no meaning and that we are simply pawns of fate, or, in Reverend Dean's words, that "our lives have ultimate meaning and that we are... very, very special." The first answer leads to nihilism and despair, the second answer leads to narcissism and self-righteousness. And neither are what God wants. But the genealogy of Jesus can lead us to a third and oh-so-much-better answer than either despair or narcissism: For the genealogy of Jesus shows us It is about what God is doing in this world, in us, and in all those who crowd around that manger, in that expanded nativity scene. In those forty-two

⁵http://www.foundryumc.org/sermons/9_14_2008.htm All subsequent quotes from him are from this source.

⁶<https://twitter.com/RepDLamborn/status/670394068355026945/photo/1>

generations we find, as Revered Dean says, “heroism and bravery and courage, but... also incest, infidelity, prostitution, embezzlement..., parental favoritism, fierce jealousies, siblings who wouldn’t speak to each..., adultery, ugly disputes about inheritances, lying and cheating.” In the face of that genealogy, we are challenged to make a choice: 1) to give into the nihilism and despair, or 2) decide that we are the only ones who matter – or 3) whether we shall decide to “choose to belong, to engage, to care, to love. [For] It is this belonging and loving that we find our memory, our history, our direction and our hope.”⁷

My friends, on this first Sunday of Advent, the Sunday that the worldwide church has indeed called “Hope Sunday” it is my prayer for both you and me that we shall gaze at that great crowd around that now-expanded nativity scene, and know that indeed God can yet work through you and me to make this world a more hope-filled place. Beginning this Sunday and continuing throughout the season of Advent on the way to the Christmas cradle, I would exhort us all to join that crowd that surrounds that manger, and remember, again, that ours is not a prissy and pristine God, only deigning to work through the proper and the perfect. Whatever our own sins and imperfections and flaws, may we never be so presumptuous as to decide God cannot work through us to make this world a little less violent, a little more loving, a little more caring. I believe this with all my heart, perhaps more this morning than ever before. God can and God will. For God can and God will. God will. God will.

Amen.

⁷Dean, Ibid.