

What Child is This? #1 – “The Child of the Tree”

Matthew 1: 1-17
Ephesians 1: 3-14

“What Child is this?” asks the lovely old hymn and throughout this advent season, I want to explore the answers which the gospel writer Matthew has affirmed for us, beginning with these opening verses of genealogy and continuing through the stories of announcement to Joseph, visit of magi, escape and exile in Egypt and eventual return to Nazareth. Through this first section of his narrative, Matthew wants his readers to know exactly who this Jesus is. As one commentator summarizes it, Matthew wants us to know that this Jesus is *the Christ*, the anointed one, the king whom God will send to rule over the world; he is the *son of David* descended from David’s through the royal line; he is *the son of Abraham*, in whom God’s promise that he would bless all the families of the earth would be fulfilled; he was miraculously conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, thus fulfilling God’s promise by the prophet; and lastly, through his own people, the Jews, would reject him, he is the one who would be worshipped by the Gentiles.

What Child is this? This morning, I want us to look at the first seventeen verses, in which we discover that this child is the child of the tree, the family tree, and far more deeply, the very tree of life itself.

Matthew begins his gospel with these words: *A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ.*

Now, it might seem strange to modern readers to begin a book with this daunting list of names, but to the Jewish audience to which his gospel was addressed, it was in fact a most natural and even essential way of beginning the story of a person’s life.

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The Jews were extremely interested in genealogy and in a man’s lineage. They set high value on the purity of his pedigree. Priests, for example, had to be able to prove the purity of their lineage all the way back to Moses’ brother, Aaron. Among the reasons that Herod the Great was so despised by the populous was that he was partly descended from the Edomites, ancient enemies of Israel. To be able to affirm that this Jesus could be traced back through David even unto Abraham was an impressive affirmation of his claim to be messiah, the Christ.

But Matthew also sketched this genealogy within a special paradigm or outline that had its own deep symbolism. The genealogy is cast in three groups of fourteen people. Partly this was as a mnemonic, or form shaped for easy memorization, for of course, the gospels were largely communicated by oral tradition rather than actual printed version. But the form was also cast to symbolize the whole of human life and the great story of Israel’s relationship with God. The first section traces the story of Israel up to the time of King David, who first welded this loose confederacy of tribes into a mighty nation. For this, David was always regarded as the greatest king of Israel, and his reign as their highest glory. The second section follows Israel’s story to the time of the nation’s downfall, destruction and exile in Babylon, the era of its greatest tragedy and shame. The third section traced the story from exile to Jesus, who Matthew wants his readers to understand, is the person who would liberate God’s people from their slavery and rescue them from their disaster. In him, their tragedy would be turned to highest triumph and by him would their intimate relationship with God be restored.

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ. The word which Matthew used is most interesting, because it means far more than just genealogy. The same Greek word can mean birth or beginnings, which is the title of the first book of the Old Testament, the Book of Genesis. By use of this term, it seems

that Matthew wanted his readers to understand that he was rehearsing more than the story of a particular man. In Jesus, Matthew saw one in whom not only the story of the call, identify and purpose of the whole people of Israel was reflected, but in fact, the whole human story is encapsulated. Even more, it points to the whole new creation that is coming into view with the conception and entry of God's Messiah into the midst of human history and which will be completed at his second coming.

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Matthew again wanted to point to two very special credentials in this lineage of Jesus. First, he was at pains to stress that Jesus was the son of David, a fact that was echoed again and again throughout the New Testament. Peter, in that first sermon on Pentecost, called Jesus the rightful heir to the throne of David. To the Church in Rome, Paul described Jesus the seed of David according to the flesh, and in the book of Revelation, the risen Lord calls himself the root and offspring of David. In the gospel narrative itself, Matthew says that after the healing of the blind and dumb man, the crowds exclaimed, "Is this not the son of David?" Again, the blind men called out to Jesus as the Son of David, while that same title was used by the people in Jerusalem as he rode triumphantly on the donkey into that city before Passover.

Son of David was a title that stirred every Jewish heart with the power of hope. It has sometimes been said that the Jews were above all a waiting people. They never forgot and could not forget that they were the chosen people of God, and while their history was filled with too many disasters arising from the tragedy of faithlessness, still, they never forgot their God-determined destiny. And so as they waited through countless centuries of oppression and sorrow, they never let go of the dream of glory they believed was theirs by right, a glory that would be restored when a descendant of David, the messiah, would once again sit on the throne of Israel.

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And while the people of the nation would misunderstand that Jesus did not come to fulfill their dreams of military power, material wealth and worldly ambitions, he nonetheless did come as the answer to the deepest dreams of the heart. He came as messiah to be the answer and fulfillment of every dream of peace and grace, every dream of hope and mercy, every dream of resting perfectly in the embrace of God's eternal love.

Not only was Jesus the son of David, Matthew argued, he was the son of Abraham, and thus the very fulfillment of Israel's calling and the promise and prophecy to Abraham spoken by God and recorded in the book of Genesis that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed. Abraham was called not only to receive blessing but to be a blessing, and to be a blessing not merely to his own descendants but literally to all people and all creation. Matthew begins his gospel with reference back to the beginning of the story of Abraham, the father of Israel, in whom their story begins, to emphasize that this Jesus, as messiah, would indeed be the one who fulfilled that call to be the perfect blessing to the whole world and all mankind. And so Matthew traced out the three sections of family tree, from Abraham to David, from Solomon to Jeconiah and exile; and from Shealtiel to Jesus. And here in the details of the family tree arise even more amazing affirmations about who this Jesus is. Perhaps the most amazing aspect of the genealogy is the names of the women who appear within.

Remember, Matthew is writing to a primarily Jewish audience, and within patriarchal Jewish tradition, family lineage was traced exclusively through the male side of the family. Women had no legal rights, and were regarded not as people, but things. A woman were merely the possession of first her father, and then her husband. In the regular form of morning prayer, a Jew would thank and praise God that the Lord had not made him a Gentile, a slave or a woman. The fact of this family tree containing the names of or reference to no less than five

women is absolutely incredible, especially in light of who those women were.

Three of them appear in the first part of the tree between Abraham and David. The first is Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah who conceived twins through deceiving Judah about her identity. The story of Tamar, seducer and pretended prostitute and adulterer, is found in Genesis 38.

The second is Rahab whose story is found in Joshua 2. Rahab was a harlot of Jericho who hid the spies of Israel from the king's soldiers in return for a promise that when the walls of Jericho would come a-tumbling down, the army of Israel would see the scarlet cord in the window and would spare her and her family.

The third woman is Ruth, the woman from Moab whose exemplary devotion to Naomi, her mother-in-law, led her to leave home and homeland to journey to Bethlehem, where, though a foreigner whose people were hated by Israel, she won the heart of a local farmer named Boaz. This Moabitess became not only the great-grandmother to David, but the epitome of a love that could transcend narrow ethnic boundaries and make her a heroine of Israel. The fourth woman, referenced but not named, was Bathsheba, wife of Uriah and eventual mother to Solomon. And the fifth, of course, was Mary, a teenager who went and got herself pregnant outside of marriage, and who came from a no-account, backwards village named Nazareth, from which, as Nathanael would suggest, surely nothing of value could ever come. Nothing, that is, save the Saviour of the world.

As one writer put it, if Matthew had ransacked the pages of the Old Testament for a set of more improbable candidates, he could not have discovered five more incredible ancestors for Jesus the Messiah. Yet in the very fact of the inclusion of these women we see first of all the trustworthiness of the gospel story.

Here's the thing. Any advertising man, any public relations representative, anyone wanting to put the best political

spin on their candidate would tell you to put as much distance as possible from any seemingly black-sheep family members or skeleton-in-the-closet, scandal-ridden associations. But the gospel is not about political spin to appeal to the world's self-righteous values; it's about the truth of how God's gracious providence and holy sense of humour turns the world upside down and dares to work through the least likely. After all, along side these women are old Abraham himself, a foreigner and reject who had no nation, no land, and no son to call his own, nor hope ever to be able to provide himself any of the above. Until God stepped in and took control, and poured out blessing.

Then there was Abraham's son, Isaac, whose name means laughter, and whose birth to his geriatric parents was a glorious affirmation that God's ways are not our ways, and that divine grace has a way of bursting through human pretensions and self-serious vanity, of penetrating sorrow and bringing joy even in the midst of the situations we have resolutely declared to be utterly hopeless, and of raising life where seemingly only death held sway.

There is Jacob, the little cheat, after whose new name, Israel, would Abraham's descendants be known. Not only Jacob but David himself was the unimportant younger son who, by grace, was chosen to be the means of God working out his purpose. And even David, that great king, was himself a king with feet of clay, and though a man after God's own heart, still he was a man who sinned wretchedly and wantonly and wickedly. And so on through the whole family tree – more a bunch of nobodies than anything else whose only boast could be in what God, in his outrageous and unpredictable grace, had chosen to do in and through them, for his kingdom purpose.

This family tree represents so much more of the gospel. It represents the erasure of all kinds of barriers. Rahab, the woman of Jericho and Ruth, the woman of Moab, are part of this pedigree of Jesus Christ, in whom there is neither Jew nor

Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. Here, at the very beginning of the gospel, Matthew is asserting the promise that in Christ, we become one family through the saving love of God. Also included are sinners and scoundrels like Tamar and Jacob, which reminds us that Jesus has come to claim and grace and save every scoundrel, every sinner, every child of God who has wandered far and has no haughty claim but only desperate and unending need of that grace which is heaven-sent. Above all, the family tree reminds us that if God could use and honour such rascals and reprobates for his holy purpose of bringing salvation to bear, then surely we can rejoice that there is a place for even the likes of us to be engrafted into the tree, the vine that Christ is, and find healing for our souls.

What child is this? This child of the tree is the one in whom we find our welcome, our inclusion, our adoption, our being perfectly embraced no matter how much in the past we may have felt lost, abandoned, alone, estranged or barred though our own sin and stupidity or through the cruelties of others or the tragedies of life. This child of the tree is the one by whom we are made truly the children of God, the members of the family and household of faith by grace, and therefore full sisters and brothers of all who, with laughter and love and unbounded gratitude, rejoice in that claim of grace which has laid hold of us. This child of the tree is the one by whom our greatest hopes and most precious longings and dreams of knowing ourselves utterly chosen, wholly forgiven, perfectly loved, and redeemed for eternity find their fulfillment. This, this is Christ the King – Jesus, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, the Son of Mary, the Son of the Tree, the Son of God, our Saviour and our hope.

To his name be the glory. Amen.