



There's room for every story
Matthew 1:1-17 & Isaiah 2:1-5
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Good morning! It is a joy to be with you on this first Sunday of Advent. I hope you all had a wonderful Thanksgiving this past week, and had a chance to visit with family and friends.

I think one of my favorite parts of Thanksgiving happens in the evening on Thanksgiving, as I'm sitting on the couch in a food coma, because when I scroll through Facebook, all I see are the happy family pictures from everyone's Thanksgiving tables. You know the pictures I'm talking about – everyone crams into the frame for a Thanksgiving selfie – or someone smart enough to set the timer, sets the camera up across the room and the family stands behind the table with the full spread of food laid out before them.

Though, what I really want is the before and after photos – I want to see the spread on the table before dinner, and then to see the after-photo, where half the food is missing and everyone has their top jean button undone to accommodate their over-eating. We can start a new Thanksgiving trend:
#BeenThereAteThat

Think about your favorite photos of Thanksgiving dinner – or Christmas Dinner – or any major holiday meal (any of these pictures that show the family all together): there's something special about these photos. And I don't just mean because it's a special holiday meal. I mean, there's something really important about gathering the family together in a single photo. That picture – many years from now – will serve as a glimpse back in time. We can look at these family photos from years past and recall who was there, who was missing, who has been added in, and who has passed on.

Inevitably, everyone in the photo has a story associated with their name. There was something that was happening in their lives at that time – perhaps something that was discussed around the dinner table – that we can recall when reflecting back on *that* holiday meal. I'm sure many of you have shared in these moments of recollection. Like that photo from Thanksgiving in 2005, where Cousin Helen had the biggest smile on her face because she had just gotten engaged. Or the photo from 1998, where Uncle Ricardo has a bald head, because he had just finished his third round of chemo. Or the photo from 2020, which was the first Thanksgiving photo in over 90 years without Grandma Brown in it, because she had died just three weeks earlier.

The photos aren't just social media highlights, they're stories. Embedded in the faces on every photo are very real and very personal stories.

As we begin the season of Advent, as we begin this 4-week journey over the hills of the Judean countryside to that stable-room in Bethlehem, we remember that there's room for every story.

There's often this gross misconception that Jesus came only for a select few. There's a fault in many a teaching that says the coming of God in Christ was to offer life and love for only those who have lived saintly lives, which offer a perfect witnesses to God's will and desire for humanity (as if any of us have ever lived that life).

But here in Matthew's Gospel – right at the start of the New Testament text – we get a glimpse of the promise that there's room for every story in the good news of God's love, which is to be born and proclaimed in the incarnation of Christ.

Matthew's gospel begins with these words: "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

It is believed that Matthew was writing his narrative account of Jesus' life for those who were steeped in the Jewish tradition. He is writing to proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah – the long awaited king – for which the people of Israel have been waiting. His introduction of Jesus lays the groundwork for this Jewish-centric focus right at the start. Jesus is the son of David. He is of the right lineage, coming as a fulfillment of the prophetic promises (including that which we heard last week in Jeremiah 23), which proclaim that God's king to come will come from David's line.

And Matthew says he is a son of Abraham, the father of the people Israel. Jesus is a Jew of Jews.

With those succinct claims being made up front, Matthew then offers a full genealogical account of Jesus' family tree, dating all the way back to Abraham. The author won't settle for a simple proclamation that Jesus is a son of David and Abraham, he's going to give account for such a messianic claim.

Yet, what Matthew offers in this genealogical remembrance isn't a clean-cut patriarchal tracing of Jesus' ancestors. That's what we would have expected, for at the time this text was written, clean-cut patriarchy was the majority world-view. But here, Matthew doesn't clean up the family photo – he's not photoshopping anyone out of the photo to make it more palatable. Matthew is offering a holiday meal type photo where everyone is present, and where everyone has a story.

Let's consider a few of the stories that are part of Jesus' genealogical tree.

There are names on this list that you likely recognize, like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, David, and Solomon. These are some of the more popular names of the Old Testament in the Hebrew Scriptures; names often remembered by the Christian Church today.

But what about Aminadab? Aminadab was the father-in-law of Aaron (who married Aminadab's daughter Elisheva). Aaron is remembered as part of the famous duo – Aaron and Hur – as the two men held up Moses' arms in Exodus 17. Amindab's son, Nahshon, who is listed as the next generation in Jesus' genealogical remembrance, was appointed a tribal leader of the Judahites by Moses.

Shortly thereafter, we find what no clean-cut patriarchal genealogical listing would ever had included. We are told that “Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab.” First off, that Matthew is even listing the women of Jesus’ lineage is significant in and of itself. But not just that, Rahab’s story is one of great complexity. While often remembered as a prostitute, Rahab was a prophet, who lifted up God’s promises and offered protection to her community as the world around her was being destroyed.

Just after Rahab, we have “Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth.” Again, Matthew is naming the women who are a part of Jesus’ lineage. And, if for no other reason, Ruth is significant because Ruth was a Moabite. Moabites had the same ethnic background as Israelites, but followed a different lineage from Abraham and were a people often found in conflict with the Israelites. Jesus is being hailed as this great Jew, and yet, Matthew makes sure to acknowledge that his lineage is a melting pot of cultural inclusion. Indeed, in this genealogical tree, we have listed Ruth the Moabite, Tamar the Canaanite, and Bathsheba the Hittite.

Speaking of Bathsheba, Matthew offers that “David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah.” I find it odd that, having named both Rahab and Ruth by name, Matthew chooses not to mention this woman by name, but the wife of Uriah is Bathsheba. This is the woman that David assaulted; the woman whose husband (Uriah) was killed while serving in the military as a personal favor for King David so that he could “have” Bathsheba. I’m not sure about your family tree, but with Uriah and his wife mentioned, it’s hard to hide the pain of Jesus’ family tree, which includes assassination and sexual assault.

Shortly after Solomon, we have Abijah. Abijah became the King of the Southern Kingdom of Judah after the death of his father, Rehoboam. Abijah is remembered for his leadership of the military in defeating Jeroboam, who was considered an idolatrous king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Abijah may have been held in high regard for his victory, only, after defeating Jeroboam’s army, Rabbinic literature recalls that Abijah mutilated the corpses of the dead soldiers. God was so angry at this act, that God had Abijah killed shortly after the victory and Abijah never enjoyed the fruits of his military labor. It was not until his son took over as king that Judah had a few years of peace.

Then there’s Jechoniah. King Jechoniah, who is often referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures simply as “Coniah,” was the last of the kings of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Like Abijah, he is not remembered with fondness. The prophet Jeremiah writes of Jechoniah, “Is this man Coniah a despised broken pot, a vessel no one wants? Why are he and his offspring hurled out and cast away in a land that they do not know? ... Thus says the Lord: Record this man as childness, a man who shall not succeed in his days; for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David, and ruling again in Judah.”

There are 41 generations listed in Matthew’s genealogical listing. 41 generations of stories that range from great faithfulness, to woeful hypocrisy and evilness. If you think that your story, that the stories that are found in the lives of those who share your family tree, are unredeemable, just look again at Matthew’s list.

Consider Jeconiah here for one more moment. Jeremiah, in his prophecy, says that Jeconiah shall be childless, and that no offspring of his shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David. And yet, after Jeconiah, we have 12 more generations before Jesus is born of Mary. Though he was an unfaithful king, an unworthy and unrighteous ruler, Jeconiah did have a son: Salathiel. And after Salathiel, Zerubbabel, and then Abiud, and Eliakim, and Azor, and Sadok, and Achim, and Eluid, and Eleazar, and Matthan, and Jacob, and Joseph – who was betrothed to Mary, who is the mother of Jesus.

In this genealogical listing, we can already hear that Jesus is a witness to the grace and love of God that can bring life to the lifeless and redemption to the unredeemable. Though King Jeconiah, according to Jeremiah's prophecy, was not worth of a child, it is through his lineage we arrive at Jesus.

And we shouldn't be surprised by such a turn of events. Such a revelation is what is promised of the Messiah by the prophets. The Hebrew Scriptures are full of prophecies that we claim point to Christ as the great healer of all burdens and pains. Christ is the one who will believe the scriptures point to as the redeemer of broken stories. Consider what Isaiah has to say in this morning's reading from Isaiah, chapter 2.

"In the days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it." Remember Jesus' genealogical tree is a cultural melting pot; so too is the Kingdom of God. As Christ's witness will proclaim, in the family of God there is no "us versus them;" we are all part of the same creation: God's created humanity. All nations shall stream to the mountain of the Lord.

Isaiah then continues, "For out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord."

Now, I know that the family dinner table is not the place we like to bring up religion and politics, but just consider what is being promised in this text. In this advent promise – in the prophecy of what God is doing in creation – religion and politics are the center of concern. If we really want to celebrate Christmas, if we really want to center the gift of God in Christ, then we would do well to remember what comes with that gift.

The promise of advent, the reality of Christmas, is that in Christ we have no more need for war. And not just war, but weapons of war. Using the language of the ancient culture, Isaiah says swords and spears shall be turned into ploughshares and pruning-hooks; had this been written in a modern vernacular, he'd likely have said guns and ammo shall be turned into tractors and turbines.

See, the good news of God in Christmas ... the hope to which we cling in this season of advent ... is anti-cultural. Even if the culture has appropriated the holiday for consumeristic purposes, Christmas is an anti-capitalistic event. It's a promise that says no matter what your ethnic, racial, or tribal identity may

proclaim, there is a more God-centric identity where nation does not rise against nation, but where all people are joined in one accord to sing Joy to the World, the Lord is Come.

And this promise is made because, as Matthew's genealogical tree makes clear, every story matters. There is no story or life that is unredeemable. The stories of people like Devin Chandler, Lavel Davis Jr, and D'Sean Perry matter. The stories of Lorenzo Gamble, Brian Pendleton, Kellie Pyle, Randall Blevins, and Tyneka Johnson – they matter. Their stories matter, but their faces won't be in the family Thanksgiving photo this year. These 8 were killed at UVA and in Chesapeake over the past two weeks.

There's a reason Isaiah says that in our future with God, in our faithfulness to Christ, we will turn swords into ploughshares – guns into tractors – because to the Creator, every life matters. In God's book, our stories matter. It is proclaimed time and again in anticipation of Christ: "There will be no more weeping;" "No longer will a nursing infant live but a few days;" "No longer will people be considered old at 100."

I know that for many of us, we prefer the silent night of the Bethlehem stable to the boisterous night of arguing that can happen when people of opposing thoughts engage in conviction warfare. We prefer to leave the religious and political topics that often divide us out of the conversational whack-a-mole at the holiday table.

But in the promise of advent, in the hope of Christ, in the joy of the season, we have a truth to proclaim and a hymn to sing. Christmas is not a holiday for silence and subverted dreams. For if we are silent, even the rocks will cry out. The heavens will break forth, and the angels will lead the chorus.

So pay attention this season, for, from generation to generation, God has proclaimed that every story matters – every person has a story to tell. Even in the most unexpected, perhaps unwelcomed of faces, God is present and propels the story forward. This has been true since Abraham and David, and continues to be true in our community today as God's love is revealed and proclaimed. May we join our story with God's in the anticipation and celebration of Christ. Amen.