

Who God Is, Who God Has Always Been

Matthew 1:1-17

Rev. Dan Schumacher

I'd like to start by reading you the Christmas story according to the Gospel of Matthew:
[Read Matthew 1:1-17]

Not exactly what you were expecting, was it?

No camels or lowing cattle or angels proclaiming good tidings of great joy in that version of the Christmas story. Just a list of names so hard to pronounce that it takes a theological degree to even attempt it.

Twenty-seven years ago today, I broke my right hand. My brother and I were rough-housing out in the backyard, one thing led to another, and, before I knew it, dad had me loaded up in the family van and was taking me to the ER. They wrapped me in a splint, gave me a load of painkillers – Percocet or something similar, I assume, and sent me on my merry way.

There was only one problem. My sister was home from college, and we were slated to sing a duet that night at the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service. And now, thanks to my broken right hand and those painkillers, I was as high as a kite.

I literally do not remember much from that night. I have some vague recollections of the drive to church, some flashes of sitting in the sanctuary near the front, but I almost cannot remember the duet at all. I don't even remember what song we sang. All I remember is looking over at my sister in the middle of our duet and her giving me this death stare – this almost-pin-you-to-the-ground look of death. And me too high on painkillers to figure out why or, frankly, to even care.

The next morning, once the painkillers had worn off, my brother told me why she was giving me a death stare. Apparently I wasn't singing so much as I was screaming. I was not on pitch, completely out of rhythm, and very, very loud. He said, and I quote, "It was the most awkward and hilarious thing I have ever seen."

Now why would I tell you that story? Because I imagine coming to a Christmas Eve Candlelight service and hearing the pastor read the genealogy of Jesus is sort of like showing up and watching someone scream their way through a duet of "Silent Night."

Why on earth would I choose to read or, maybe even worse, preach on the genealogy of Jesus tonight of all nights?

Because in this list of names is an image of who God is, and who God has always been. The "story of the origin of Jesus Christ" begins with Abraham begetting Isaac; no mention of that deserving elder son, Ishmael, who was unfairly banished. Then Isaac begets Jacob. Again, not a word about his elder brother, Esau, whose birthright Jacob

stole. Jacob begets Judah and his brothers. But why is Judah chosen? Wasn't Joseph clearly the best of the brothers — favored by God with visionary dreams and whose administration would save a generation from starvation in Egypt.

We're only four names deep, and so far God hasn't chosen a single person we would have chosen. What is going on here? Is this who God is — a God who does not necessarily select the noblest or even the most deserving people to carry out God's purposes?

Isn't that interesting when we stop to think about it? For reasons that make no earthly sense to us, God selects the Judahs who sell their brothers into slavery, the Jacobs who cheat their way to the top, the Davids who steal wives and murder their rivals.

And what about the five women mentioned in this genealogy? Did you notice who they *weren't*?

They *weren't* Sarah or Rebekah or Rachel — the matriarchs of the faith. Instead, it was *Tamar*, a Canaanite, who disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced her father-in-law to get a son out of him. And, it was *Rahab*, another Canaanite and real prostitute this time. And *Ruth* the Moabite — another foreigner, another outsider. And *Bathsheba*, the woman David took for himself and whose husband he murdered — yet she is the mother of King Solomon.

Every single one of these women is not only an outsider, but someone whose story includes the scent of scandal. And yet God used them... and Matthew included them in Jesus' family tree. The fifth and final woman would have scandal attached to her story, too: *Mary*, the mother of Jesus — teenage pregnancy, and not even by her fiancé. What's Joseph to do?

Are you starting to glimpse of it? Matthew's genealogy is trying to show us how the story of Jesus Christ contained — and still contains — the flawed and abandoned and inflicted of this world, the cunning and the weak-willed and the misunderstood.

And what about the final fourteen generations of unknown and unremarkable names — names of those who, as far as we know, never did anything significant at all. Who was Azor or Achim? Eliud or Eleazar? Let me tell you, they're never gone show up on *Time's 100 Most Influential People*. But here they are, listed as ancestors of Jesus.

And this is where the message settles directly on us. If so much powerful stuff was accomplished down through the millennia by good-for-nothings and betrayers and outcasts and cheats, and even through all those obscure and unknown others, isn't it a pretty hopeful testament to the likelihood that God is using us, too?

For the writer of Matthew, the Christmas story starts with that *sorry* family tree, because what he wants us to know is that the birth of Jesus means that each and every one of those names is of immense worth.

The Catholic Priest, Father Gregory Boyle, tells this story:

“I grew up in an old, large house. My five sisters and two brother and I were told never to go to the attic. This is all we needed to hear. Before long, we were selling tickets to the attic.

On one of our forays there... we found a box of old record albums. One thick, red-clay recording was labeled ‘O Holy Night’ – Kathleen Conway. Conway was my mom’s maiden name. We hurried downstairs, placed the record on our toy phonograph, and encircled the speakers, lying on our stomachs, fists propping up our attentive heads.

A glorious, though timeworn and scratchy, voice came through the speakers. Our mom, it turns out, before she decided to have eight kids, was an opera singer. We could barely fathom that the voice that hollered at us to come to dinner belonged to this magic emerging from our toy phonograph. We played the grooves off of that record.

Consequently, a line from the song found itself permanently etched in my brain – a mantra of sorts: “Long lay the world in sin and error pining – ’til He appeared and the soul felt its worth” (*Tattoos on the Heart*, 1996).

And isn’t that what Matthew is trying to convey to us? That when he appeared, all those souls suddenly felt their worth.

The Biblical Scholar, Raymond Brown, says it like this: “If the beginning of the story involved as many sinners as saints, so has the sequence ever since... The God who wrote the beginnings with crooked lines also writes the sequence with crooked lines.” And, here’s the thing: some of those crooked lines are sitting in this room right now. Some of those crooked lines are even preaching.

The Sunday after my infamous Christmas Eve duet, the pastor grabbed me and led me up to where I had been sitting that night. Apparently, in my drug-induced haze, I had also decided to carve my name into the back of the church pew and date it to let people know that I had, in fact, been there on Christmas Eve, 1996.

Who could have guessed that 27 years later, the kid who did everything he could to ruin Christmas Eve would be standing here preaching tonight? But God has always used crooked lines to accomplish God’s purposes. And we stand in a sequence of crooked lines worth is “met in Thee tonight.”

“The story of the origin of Jesus Christ – Abraham fathered Issac... Jesse fathered David the king... Achim fathered Eliud... and Jesus called Peter and Paul... Paul called Timothy... someone called you... and you must call someone else” (Raymond Brown, “Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus Christ,” *Worship*, November 1986).

Merry Christmas, First Baptist family!
Amen.