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Jesus' Family Tree

Matthew 1:1-16

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Thanksgiving is a time when many of us, if we're able, gather with family and part of the conversation tends to be about our family and those who came before us. This past week, we had a special time in Maine with my dad and 14 members of our family celebrating Thanksgiving. Earlier this year, our son Greg was doing some genealogical work because he wanted to learn more about our family tree and to go back as far as he could. He found a relative we didn't know we had named **William Comstock**, my 10th great grandfather who was in Connecticut in the 1640's and attended the same church that our son Nathan and Zoe now attend and serve. Isn't that amazing?

I enjoy watching Henry Louis Gates Jr. show on PBS, *Finding Your Roots* which explores fascinating ancestries and family mysteries for an array of notable guests. On November 15, actor Leslie Odom Jr., who won a Tony Award as Aaron Burr in the Broadway production of the musical *Hamilton* was one of the guests (Sharon post a photo) and he learned one of his 5th great grandfathers was a slaveowner in Barbados and a 4th great grandfather was a white man in a South Carolina regiment in the Confederate Army! Odom said, "*None of us chooses how we begin.*" Who do you tend to remember and talk about in your family tree? Most of us remember those who were famous, successful, or admirable. Some folks on Cape Cod talk of their ancestors who came to North America on the Mayflower. Have you ever wished you had someone famous as an ancestor, but found instead that most of your family tree was made up of ordinary people and a cast of characters, some of whom you'd prefer to keep quiet? Would it be a comfort to know that even in Jesus' family tree there are some eyebrow raising stories that you might cover up if you found they were part of your roots?

Most people who read the Bible skip over genealogies because they seem boring – what could a list of names possibly contribute to my understanding of God, my spiritual life, or my life in general? I suspect at least a few people have no idea the kind of things that happen in families in the Bible and folks would be

surprised to discover some of what's in it. Jesus' genealogy contains revealing, surprising, and even shocking stories if you take the time to investigate.

Listen to **Matthew 1:1-16**.

1 An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, **3 and Judah** the father of Perez and Zerah by **Tamar**, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, **4 and Aram** the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, **5 and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab**, and **Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth**, and Obed the father of Jesse, **6 and Jesse the father of King David.**

And **David** was the father of Solomon **by the wife of Uriah**, **7 and Solomon** the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, **8 and Asaph** the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, **9 and Uzziah** the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, **10 and Hezekiah** the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, **11 and Josiah** the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

12 And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, **13 and Zerubbabel** the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, **14 and Azor** the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, **15 and Eliud** the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, **16 and Jacob** the father of Joseph the husband of **Mary**, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.”

This morning I want to look at the four women who are mentioned in Jesus' ancestry besides his mother Mary. Women are not usually included in Biblical genealogies, even though they take all the risks and do all the hard work of childbearing. Matthew mentions four women: **Tamar, Rahab, Ruth**, and “**the**

wife of Uriah” whose name was **Bathsheba**. Each of these women teaches us about God’s grace and God’s promises. I need to warn you the nature of these stories are PG-13. Listen to some of Jesus’ family stories.

Tamar’s story (Matt. 1:3) is found in **Genesis 38**. The story begins with a man named Judah who’s the husband of a Canaanite woman named Bath-Shua. Together they have **three sons Er, Onan, and Shelah**. Er marries Tamar but he’s a wicked man and he dies. Judah tells his second son Onan to do what the law of their faith commands, *“Go into your brother-in-law’s wife and raise up offspring for her.”* This was important because in those days, kids were older people’s social security, they took care of parents in their old age, and a widow with no children was in serious trouble. Onan doesn’t want to do what the law commands because he knows any kids he produces won’t be his but Tamar’s. So, he doesn’t do what he was supposed to do, and the Bible says this displeased the Lord. Soon he was dead. Judah was more than a little worried about this woman who had now married and buried his two oldest sons. He has only his youngest son Shelah left, so Judah tells Tamar to remain a widow until Shelah is old enough to marry and then he will do what the law of their faith commands and try to give her children. This is a deception on Judah’s part; he’s just trying to get rid of her. Judah has no intention of letting her marry his surviving son because he feared he’d die like the others. Meanwhile, Tamar goes back to her father’s house to wait.

Later, Judah’s wife Bath-Shua dies. The poor guy has now lost two sons and his wife. After an appropriate time of mourning, he, and his friend Hirah the Adullamite head over to Timnah for the sheep shearing. Tamar learns of this, changes from her widow’s garments into a more enticing and alluring outfit and goes and sits by the road where she knows Judah will pass by. His wife having been dead for some time, Judah sees her, and thinking she is a temple prostitute, he walks over to cut a deal. He gives her his signet or seal, a small semiprecious stone with writing cut into its surface that makes an impression in clay or wax. Judah wore his on a cord around his neck. A seal was used to designate ownership of objects or documents. Judah’s staff was a rod or pole

that a shepherd could lean on or uses to guide the flock. These are the personal items Tamar gets from Judah as a pledge until he can send her sheep in exchange for the opportunity to be intimate with her. Buying on credit is not an entirely new practice. They're intimate, she conceives, and then she goes back home and puts her widow's clothes back on. Eventually her pregnancy can no longer be hidden and when it becomes known, Judah is told, and he condemns her to a terrible death. **Genesis 38:25-26** says, "As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, *'It was the owner of these who made me pregnant.'* And she said, ***'Take note, please whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.'***" Judah then had to confess she was more in the right than he was because she wanted him to obey what the law commands and he did not give her his son. Tamar bore twin sons **Perez**, a breach, and Zerah, brightness. **Through Perez she is an ancestor of King David and Jesus.**

The second woman mentioned in Jesus' family tree is **Rahab** (Matt. 1:5). **Rahab's** story is found in **Joshua 2**. **Joshua 2:1-2** says, *"Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, 'Go, view the land, especially Jericho.' So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there."* Told to view the land and especially Jericho the spies instead appear to go straight to Rahab's house. Maybe an arrangement was made ahead of time. Rahab bravely defied the orders of the king of Jericho to turn the spies over. Instead, she misdirected the king's men sending them out on a fruitless pursuit. After hiding the two spies, she helped them escape from Jericho by letting down a rope from her home which was built against the city wall. Perhaps this was a convenient location for clients to exit given her line of work. We're told that Rahab is motivated by a genuine faith in God and a belief that the city would fall. She says (**Joshua 2:11**), ***"The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below."*** Rahab asked that the men swear to her that they'd spare her family when they returned to conquer the city. Rahab signaled the invaders by tying a length crimson cord to her window (Joshua 2:18). When the Israelites conquered Jericho, Rahab and her family were spared (Joshua 6:25). In the New Testament she's cited in the

letters of Hebrews and James as **a heroine of faith** (Hebrews 11:31) and **righteous works** (James 2:25). She married a man named Salmon and they were the parents of **Boaz**. Did you know **Boaz** ended up marrying a woman named **Ruth**?

Ruth is the third woman mentioned in Jesus' family tree (Matt. 1:5). Yet another **foreigner**, Ruth was a Moabite who married Mahlon of the Judahite family of Elimelech. Widowed and childless, she left her own family, country, and faith to accompany her devastated mother-in-law Naomi back to Bethlehem. Naomi had lost her spouse and two sons, just like Judah, Tamar's father-in-law. Ruth's bold initiative continued as she secured food for herself and Naomi by working in the fields of Boaz, Rahab's son, a good man who was Ruth's second nearest relative by marriage. Following her mother-in-law's advice, she arranged a late-night rendezvous at the threshing floor where she surprised Boaz and asked him to redeem and marry her (Ruth 3:6f). Ruth is a Moabite woman, an outsider with no status whatsoever asks a man of Israel to fulfill the law of Israel's God. Those who later witnessed their marriage arrangement blessed Ruth and Boaz saying (**Ruth 4:12**), *"Through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of **Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.**"* The women of **Bethlehem** praised Ruth as the loving daughter-in-law who meant more to Naomi than seven sons (Ruth 4:15). Bethlehem will play a significant role in the birth of Jesus generations later.

The fourth woman in Jesus' family tree (Matt. 1:6) is **"the wife of Uriah the Hittite,"** whose name is **Bathsheba**. Can you imagine sharing your family story and openly telling everyone, "There was an inappropriate relationship," by saying *"the wife of Uriah."* This is perhaps the most regretful story of all. The story of Bathsheba begins in 2 Samuel 11. The name "Sheba" probably refers to a foreign god, which may indicate the family of Bathsheba, was also of non-Israelite origin. Bathsheba was married to Uriah, also a foreigner, who was one of King David's mighty men (2 Samuel 23:39), one of David's bravest and most loyal soldiers. Uriah was a man of courage and valor whose house was in Jerusalem. While Uriah was risking his life on the battlefield with Joab fighting the

Ammonites for his king, David was idly sitting around, coveting Uriah's wife, and finally forcing himself upon her and making her pregnant.

To cover up his sin, David brought Uriah home from the front on leave, to eat, drink, and enjoy being with his wife. However, Uriah was such a man of integrity and honor that he refused to enjoy those privileges while his comrades were in the field (2 Samuel 11:11). When David couldn't get Uriah to go home and be with his wife, he tried getting him drunk, thinking he might go home then, but Uriah did not. Desperate to cover up his own sin, David sent Uriah back to the front carrying a top-secret message for his commander Joab, which contained David's order to place Uriah in such an exposed position during the siege of Rabbath-ammon (modern Amman, the capital of Jordan) that his death would be inevitable. With Uriah dead, David married Bathsheba, but God was displeased and sent Nathan the prophet to convict David of his sin. The son who was born to David and Bathsheba died shortly after birth. Bathsheba became the mother of Solomon, and she lobbied David hard to name Solomon as his successor to the throne of Israel, which he did.

Most people who have not studied the Bible closely are at least a little shocked or surprised that these stories of incest, a prostitute, foreigners, sexual assault, and murder are all a part of Jesus' family tree. Kind of makes you not feel quite as bad about your own family history doesn't it? What do these stories tell us about God's grace and about our own families today?

First, they reveal the humanity of Jesus. People who think families in the Bible represent some pristine ideal to be emulated either are ignorant of or ignoring the reality of Jesus' own family tree. Families are always a little messy. Jesus came from a family with as many less than flattering episodes as many of us. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus is also seeking to refute the contention that Jesus wasn't human at all. In Matthew's gospel, which was first composed for a Jewish audience, Jesus' family tree is traced back through King David to show that Jesus is heir to the promise of kingship to David and his descendants. Jesus is also a son of Abraham that means he is an heir to the promises of blessing God gave to the father of Biblical faith. Jesus is an authentic Jew through and

through. Without those bloodlines and this family tree, there is no need for Matthew to write a gospel claiming Jesus is the Messiah.

Second, **Matthew's genealogy of Jesus' family reveals that women as well as men played key leadership roles in advancing the cause of God.**

The women exemplify inspiring courage, initiative, faith, cleverness, loyalty, and devotion in face of being widowed, demeaned, threatened, and abused.

Foreigners as well as Israelites have been involved in Jesus' family tree reminding us that God's family extends to and includes people we may not at first welcome or relish as our kinfolk. You may find some people in your family easier to love than others too. Remembering that God loves everyone in our family, perhaps you can accept an Advent and Christmas challenge of trying to work on improving a family relationship that may be strained or difficult for you.

Third, in all of our family trees there are some folks we may be prouder of or quicker to point out than others, however, none of our trees is totally exemplary and Jesus' family isn't any different. The presence in Jesus' family tree of men and women whose character and actions were questionable serves as a reminder that God's great plan of salvation has included people we might be less than ready to invite to be church members. All these women have personal stories that are at least a bit surprising if not shocking, **yet through them God encouraged others to keep the law of God, to protect God's people, to remind us that God can use even sin in a redemptive way (although that sin may have dire and severe consequences for ourselves and others), and to insure that God's promises would be fulfilled.**

Therefore, it shouldn't be a surprise, Matthew is telling us in the very beginning of his gospel, that God could work to bring the Messiah through a not yet married teenage girl named **Mary** who gets pregnant through God's intervention (Matt. 1:16). **Mary is the fifth and final woman** in Jesus' genealogy.

Matthew shows us through his genealogy of Jesus' family that God's promises can be trusted over many years and even in seemingly difficult or improbable circumstances where it doesn't seem possible for God to bring something good or redeeming.

The genealogy of Jesus teaches us is that God is with us in good times and in bad, in times of kings (1:6) when we feel on top of the world and in times of exile (1:11) when it seems all hope is lost.

We may not feel worthy to be included as part of God's family, but we're encouraged by these women and their stories to

Obey the law of God as Tamar did, to

Confess with Rahab our faith in God in heaven above and on earth below, to

Make the God of Naomi and Ruth our God, to

Overcome trauma, heartache and grief as did Bathsheba, and especially to

Believe as Matthew invites us to that **the son of Mary, Jesus** is also the son of Abraham, the son of David, the Messiah.

Christmas is about preparing for the arrival of a baby. Thirty years ago, at Christmas time we shared with our church in Prospect Park, Pennsylvania, that we were expecting our first child, now we're expecting our first grandchild to be born to Nathan and Zoe in April. We pray all goes well and we can welcome a new addition to our family tree in the spring.

God would like to welcome each and every one of us to Jesus' family tree. You're invited, through believing in Jesus and actively following him, to become new people who can say with gratitude *"I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God."*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. How much do you know about your family's genealogy and your family tree? Who do you tend to remember and talk about in your family tree? Are there stories, experiences, or events that are "not discussed?"
2. How do you feel about the women in Jesus' family tree – who they were, what they did, suffered, or experienced? Was any of this new to you?
3. Why do you think Matthew included these women and their stories in his genealogy of Jesus to begin his Gospel? What message is he trying to send?

4. Why do you think Matthew calls all the women by their names, except for Bathsheba, who is called “the wife of Uriah.” What would his intent or purpose be in doing that?
5. What does the genealogy of Jesus teach us about God and God’s promises? What does it teach us about God’s people?
6. What does Matthew hope the women in Jesus’ family tree will inspire you to do in your own life?