

## Matthew 1:1-17

What you just heard is the first word of Christmas. Matthew is the first book of the New Testament, the first gospel, the first appearance of the news of the messiah. If you had never heard of Jesus or Christianity or the New Testament before, and you just picked up the book and flipped to the first page, this is where you would start, right here in this list of names, in this litany of so-and-so was the father of so-and-so, and he was the father of so-and-so, and on and on and on, 42 generations of family tree. In Matthew, the story of Jesus doesn't begin in miracle in a stable, or with a star shining in the distance, or with a decree going out from Caesar Augustus, or with kings and shepherds making pilgrimages to see a newborn savior. It doesn't begin with a jealous Herod or journeys to Bethlehem. It doesn't even begin with a hymn about the Word made flesh, or a light shining into the darkness. The gospel of Matthew, the first word of Christmas, the first page of the New Testament begins, a little bit anticlimactically: with a genealogy. A family tree. It begins with a simple, embellishment-free list of names.

Now a gospel is really nothing more than a particular kind of biography, and the writer of the gospel of Matthew was not unusual in including a genealogy right

there on the front page of his biography of Jesus. Lots of people did that; the Greeks did it, the Romans did it, Lord knows the Hebrews did it, and if you've ever tried to read through the book of Numbers, you're probably nodding your head right now. A genealogy might be a boring way to start the good news; to us it might seem to us to be less than great way to get started—but for Matthew's time and place it was pretty normal. If you've read other ancient biographies and other ancient literature, there's nothing really surprising here. It's just the usual setting of the stage that tells you who exactly the subject of the story is.

Now some of you know that I moonlight over at Iliff and DU as a doctoral student in Biblical Interpretation. One of the quirky things about Bible scholars is that we don't often care that much about the completely normal stuff—the things in a text that we expect to be there, that convention dictates should be there. Instead, we like to pay attention to the weird stuff—the stuff that's out of place, the things that vary from the expected. For us, it's much more interesting to find the ways in which an author deviates from the norm, how he might follow a convention so far, only to do something totally unexpected. For us, that's really exciting, and yes, that is what passes for “really exciting” when you're a Bible scholar.

So, yes, Matthew is like a ton of other ancient texts in that it includes a genealogy, and that's kinda interesting. But it's where Matthew deviates from the norm that things start to get really cool. And Matthew does deviate from the norm. He does something that really wasn't typical at all of genealogies, in the Bible, or anywhere else; he did something totally unexpected and unconventional, and he did it right there on page 1 of the New Testament: he put women in Jesus' genealogy.

Five women, to be exact. And not just any five women. If you were going to pick five women to include out of those 42 generations Matthew describes, I don't know that these five would be at the top of the list. These were skeletons that most of us would think were better off left in the closet. These were the relatives that we wouldn't want to tell anybody about. These were the kinfolk we wouldn't tell people we were related to. These were women with a past. With history. With sordid and scandalous tales to tell. As we might say today, these were women with issues.

There's a story told of a man who once paid someone \$500 to look up his genealogy. And when the results came in, he had to pay the guy \$500 more to

keep quiet.

Knowing where we come from can sometimes be inspiring and magical, but it can also sometimes be embarrassing and troubling. Like the man who paid the genealogist to keep quiet, we may find that we were better off not doing too much digging around in the past. Here's what we find when we go digging around in Jesus' past. And I have to warn you, if you have young children sitting with you today, you might want to cover their ears, because we're going to hear some Bible stories, and I don't know if you knew this or not, but there's some crazy stuff in the Bible. So now that you've been warned, let's meet these five women.

The first woman listed in the genealogy of Jesus is Tamar. There are a few different Tamars in the Bible, and none of them really had a very easy life, but this Tamar had probably the most difficult. She was married for a time, but her husband died without producing an heir. For the people at that time, this was very bad; each man needed to produce a male heir, since property usually couldn't be inherited by a woman. There was a custom at the time, one we would consider cruel and barbaric, but which was completely normal for them, called Levirate marriage. In a Levirate marriage, in a case like Tamar's, when a man died

without producing an heir, his widow and the dead man's closest living male relative were supposed to produce a child, which would be considered an heir to the deceased man. In this case, though, the closest relative, a brother, who was named Onan, refused to go through with it, and was put to death. This left Tamar with no viable option for producing a son, which meant that she had no way to inherit her deceased husband's property and support herself. So she hit upon a plan: one day as her father-in-law, Judah, was going to town, Tamar dressed herself up like a prostitute and seduced him, and she got pregnant and gave birth to twin boys, one of whom became the ancestor of Jesus.

This is hardly the kind of story most of us would want advertised from our family tree. It's not the kind of thing we'd want right there on the front page of our biography, either. But there she is. There is this woman, from as scandalous a story as you could imagine, seducing her father in law by pretending to be a prostitute, the kind of thing only someone at the very end of their rope might do. Tamar was at the margins of her world, about to slip out of the margins and into oblivion, and she only saved herself from that oblivion by leveraging the one thing she had left, and there she is, in Jesus' genealogy.

But Tamar is just the first of the five women in Jesus' family tree, and while Tamar pretended to be a prostitute, Rahab actually was one. Rahab was a prostitute in the city of Jericho at the time that the Israelites were trying to conquer it. She helped two spies that Israel sent ahead, and in return they protected her as they destroyed the city. Later she married an Israelite, and produced a son, and she became a part of the lineage of Jesus.

So now the genealogy of Jesus had a prostitute in it. If you're writing an introduction to the man you want to convince people is the son of God, then this is surely a strange way to start. It's a scandal. It's the stuff of tabloids and rumors, not the stuff of gospels. But there is her name, on the front page of the gospel.

The third woman included is Ruth. Ruth was involved in a story similar to the one of Tamar. Her husband had died without producing an heir, but with the added complication that her brother-in-law and father-in-law had died too. She and her mother-in-law, Naomi, struck out together in search of a way to support themselves. Naomi knew of a relative of hers, Boaz, who was a prominent rich man, and who might be able to support them. She sent Ruth to Boaz in the middle of the night to seduce him. The Hebrew actually uses a nifty little euphemism,

that she “uncovered his feet,” and I’ll let you imagine what that might be a euphemism for. The feet-uncovering worked, and they were eventually married. The story of Ruth and Boaz is one of the most scandalous in the Bible, and what Ruth and Naomi did was far outside of the standards of behavior that people were expected to follow. But scandal or no scandal, Ruth is Jesus’ ancestor, and so there she is in Matthew’s genealogy, in the history of the family of Jesus.

The fourth woman is Bathsheba. Her story is well-known; her house was next door to the palace of King David. One day he saw her bathing, and he was captivated by her beauty, and he ordered her to be brought to him. They had an affair, and when she became pregnant, David tried to make it look like the child wasn't his. Eventually, though, as the lie unraveled, David arranged to have Bathsheba's husband Uriah killed in battle, to cover his tracks, and after Uriah had died in battle doing what he thought was his duty to his king David, David took the opportunity to marry Bathsheba.

Now if that came up in your family tree, you might well pay the genealogist a lot more than \$500 to keep it quiet. And you might think that a story of adultery, deceit, and murder like this one doesn't belong in the family tree of Jesus. But

that is exactly where we find it. Bathsheba takes her place alongside Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth as an ancestor of Jesus.

And then comes the fifth woman, Mary. I had a New Testament professor once who said that these five women all have in common some obstetrical irregularity; that their sexuality and reproduction was in some way unusual. Now I'm not an obstetrician, but in my amateur understanding of how things work, it doesn't get too much more obstetrically irregular than a virgin birth. Today Mary is viewed as a pure figure, a good and faithful servant of God. But for some people of her time, her story would have been hard to believe. She turned up pregnant before she was married. And when asked to explain this, she said that God had spoken to her, and it was God who had made her pregnant. A likely story, people must have thought—a story that would have strained credibility, to say the very least. Mary was probably viewed with suspicion for the rest of her life, and we know that there were many rumors during Jesus' own lifetime that he was an illegitimate child. Whatever our religious convictions today, “God did this to me,” I think we can agree, is not the kind of story you would immediately find convincing if your teenager showed up pregnant. It was the same in Jesus' and Mary's time—believers believed it, and skeptics were skeptical, and the skeptics outnumbered

the believers. The sordid tales were not all in the distant past; Jesus' own mother would have served as a reminder that Jesus came not as a conqueror riding on the clouds, but as a human child, with all the frailties and complexities that come with being human.

Why are these women in Jesus' genealogy, against all probability and propriety? Why did Matthew deem them important enough to include, when he knew that he, his gospel, and his messiah Jesus would be ridiculed for it? Why, when he sat down to begin to record the life of Jesus, did he see fit to start in this way, with this cast of questionable characters, their lives shrouded as they were in controversy? What was it about these women? Why go through the trouble of including them at all? What made it worth the hassle?

I think Matthew knew, as he was penning this genealogy, that these women deserved to be the first good news of Christmas; indeed, the first good news of the gospel, which means good news. Who are these women? Overwhelmingly, they were marginal. All five of them conceived children in something other than the usual way. The culture and the society at that time would not have been

forgiving of people straying from the norm, especially in matters like that. For this, they would have been outcasts.

And speaking of being outcasts, something we haven't mentioned yet is that four of the five women—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba—were gentiles, from outside the people of Israel. This is no small thing; it would have made these marginal women even more marginal. It's difficult to live in a culture other than your own, and these four women did it. For that, they would have lived their lives without the full acceptance of their society, their religion, or even their families.

Most importantly, though, the one thing that all five of these women certainly had in common was that they were women. In their society, women were often little more than property. They had no socially-sanctioned ability to act of their own free will. But each one of these women did act of her own free will. Each one of these women did what women were not supposed to do—she listened for God's voice, she made up her mind to do something, and she did it. In each case, she would have faced intense resistance from the society, the heavy weight of shame on her shoulders. And in each case, the independent actions of these women resulted in the eventual birth of Jesus.

If Tamar had waited out her years in silence, like she was told to do, and not taken the initiative to produce an heir, the line from Abraham to Jesus would have been broken. If Rahab the prostitute hadn't harbored the Israelite spies, the Christ wouldn't have carried her blood in his veins some thirty generations later. If Ruth had done what was socially acceptable, she would have ended up dying poor and alone in a strange land, and not the ancestor of kings. David and Bathsheba's sin, as great as it was, led in time to the coming of the kingdom of heaven on earth. And you know how they must have talked about Mary. Joseph was prepared to do the good and proper thing—quietly break off their engagement—but if he'd done that, we wouldn't be here today talking about Christmas.

This is a strange way to begin a Christmas story. But look in the margins. In the margins of a seemingly boring and tedious text, you'll find the stories of five women who were doing the best they could do. They lived their lives in the margins of their society, on the edge, or just past the edge, of respectability. Probably, most of the people they met in life thought they were marginal—the kind of people whose lives could be tossed aside, and not bothered with. But we know something different, though. We know that in the story of

Jesus, it is exactly in the margins that we find meaning. The life of Jesus was spent in the margins, with prostitutes, adulterers, lepers, and thieves. He lived between the lines, past the line, of where respectable people would go. In the gospel, it's in the margins where the revolution happens.

Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, carries the blood of the gentiles, the adulterers, and the prostitute. What a way to begin a story. What a revolution, neatly tucked inside the margins of a boring genealogy. What a scandal! What a shot across the bow of complacency and propriety and thinking we have it all figured out. What a way to begin the story of a savior. What a way to trace the ancestry of the "flesh" part of "the word made flesh."

Jesus is to be found in the margins, in the places beyond where respectable people go. It's our job to follow him there, this child, this God who carries the blood of a prostitute. Jesus, the infant, the child of God and descendant of kings, was also born lowly and humble. He is our savior, the light in our darkness, the peace in our violence, the hope in our despair. And we are to be instruments of his peace, bearers of his light, and announcers of his hope. It isn't always easy to think of ourselves as the agents of Christ in the world, but if we can learn from

these five women, it's that we're all in this together, from the prominent and powerful to the ones society and culture regard not at all. This Christmas season, let us go and find our ways to the margins of our world, the places where light struggles to shine, where hope struggles to flourish, where peace struggles to break out, because it is there that we will find the infant of Bethlehem at work with us today. And when we find him, this baby messiah, let us offer a prayer of thanks for his grandmothers, whose faith and courage and perseverance are still overturning the world today.