

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
1st Sunday of Advent
December 1, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 2:1-5

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Matthew 1:1-17 NRSV (p. 1)

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Too Many Relations

It is the first Sunday of Advent. You can tell that something is different, just from the decorations in our worship space. It is a time of preparation, and we announce that with the color **purple** for the vestments and paraments: the stole that I wear the cloth on the lectern. And, the scriptures we use for this **first Sunday of Advent** rotate among the Gospels and the prophets among the three-year rotation of our lectionary. My selection today departs from the lectionary, only because this Year “A” features the *Gospel of Matthew*, and like the *Gospel of Luke*, it begins with the story of the birth of Jesus. We should recall that the *Gospel of Mark* skips this altogether, and the *Gospel of John* places Jesus with God before Creation and has the Son of God appear among human beings. (For *John*, this is more of a cosmic beginning: a new Genesis, if you will.)

Now, the writer of *Matthew* has several points to drive home throughout this telling of the Gospel story. One of these is the **covenant of God**. We, the human beings broke this, but God has not abandoned us. Amazingly, God has sent his son, **Jesus Christ**, into the world to drive home the point, **redeeming us** in this unique and amazing way in which God shows continual involvement in the life and **ministry of Jesus**. And, *Matthew* emphasizes that these imperfect beings with whom God wants to interact includes *the Jews*, but also **the Gentiles**. And, once again we need reminding that with few, if any, exceptions the Gentiles are **you and me**. So, with this rather odd list of ancestors the writer begins this book of the **New Testament**. And, these themes extend throughout the narrative in *Matthew*.

Well, I don't have to tell you that this is an exhausting scripture to read. And, this is only the second time I have done so as part of a worship service. *Matthew* is put together in just this way: The writer wants us to read a **genealogy of Jesus**. And, there are lots of reasons behind this. The writer has a particular **audience** in mind, and they are **Jewish** with knowledgeable **Gentiles** among them. Very likely most know something about **Jesus of Nazareth** and a lot about the concept of a **Messiah**. A few more at any gathering would be **converts** to the new faith, which often was called **The Way**. Many of the early Jewish believers saw the image of the Messiah, the **saviour of the people**, as a distinctly Jewish figure. Certainly, the Messiah would not arise from the other, non-Jewish people, known as *goyim* in Hebrew, which is translated as **Gentile**.

So, knowing that there is a particular slant toward a **Jewish heritage** helps us approach the entire *Gospel of Matthew*, which will be the main area of study for us throughout this church year. The list of Jewish persons is interesting. In most genealogies of that time, these would be **restricted to men** and would not include women. But, at a glance we can see **several women** in the list. And, many of the women are Gentiles: Rahab, Ruth, Tamar, Bathsheba. The Messiah is tied to these **imperfect Gentile women**, and there is good reason for this: **Jesus has come** to earth for their salvation, as well.

Stating the obvious, the list is extensive. Working from the last verse, there are groups of **fourteen generations** each. If you like to study numbers, then you should have a great time with these opening verses. The number fourteen is twice seven and **seven** is regarded as a number for **completeness**: the seven days of Creation, as an example. So, fourteen must be twice as significant; and, there are three of these, getting us to 42 generations which is a **sixfold multiple** of seven. So, falling short of another seven generations, I guess that leads the seventh part for us all to rest, as in the creation story!

And yet, this list has a set of rascals within it: a known **prostitute** in Rahab; Tamar who played up to her father-in-law as a prostitute in order to **become pregnant** by him in order to gain an inheritance; and a **seductress** in Ruth who took a shine to Boaz and threw herself at him rather aggressively. Even familiar names, such as **David**, are tied directly to a **murder plot**. He commanded the woman **Bathsheba** to appear before him, after coveting her, the wife of his best military leader, **Uriah**. Furthermore, the scriptures imply that David did not seduce her, but took her by force. As you can tell, David was **far from perfect** as a human being. And yet, he is a key person in **Jewish history** as a military and political leader and in the development of the temple worship.

And, note that the list begins with **Abraham**, who boldly answered the call of God and left his native land to travel into **Canaan**. Although bold, courageous, and **obedient to God**, Abraham has his shortcomings, as well. He passed off his wife, **Sarah**, as his sister in order to avoid a confrontation with Egyptian authorities. But, in doing this, Sarah was drafted into the role of a **concubine** for the pharaoh of Egypt!

The main thing that these heroes have is that they are part of the story of the **Hebrew people**. With all of their faults, these persons listed in *Matthew* made a dramatic difference in the outcome of history for the Hebrew nation. And, they were vital parts of **God's will** and **God's work**.

Just at glance, we can see that this is an **imperfect lineage**, but **perfectly prepared** and packaged for us to study and absorb as part of **the Gospel story**. We can painstakingly dissect it, or we can just sit back and take it in. Given an option, I suggest the more relaxed approach.

Encountering these verses, the reader is struck immediately with the reality that there are **too many relations** listed here for us to take it in, literally! And, the writer of *Matthew* is doing this **intentionally**: The list is purposefully overwhelming. In this version of **the Gospel**, the writer wants to show us that our imperfect **human nature** has led us to this moment for God to **enter our lives** and our living in the form of an infant, who is **God's Son**. And, this child will grow and mature and learn and study and absorb these difficult aspects of human nature and deal with them and judge them as God with us: **Emmanuel**. And, after accomplishing all of this Jesus found us to be just like the genealogy: full of defects, shortcomings, and **imperfections**.

In contrast, all of the Gospels show us that **Jesus** is pretty much **perfect**. The birth narratives demonstrate this, each one complementing the other so that these two stories **merge** in our memory, even though they were written for different purposes. Because of our nature, each one of us creates our own version of the **Christmas story** of Jesus. It is difficult to keep straight. But, it is not necessary that we parse them out between the two sources: *Matthew* and *Luke*.

This reflects **faith** itself. Because, emotion and **wonder** make up such a large part of what we call Faith. There is **nothing logical** about it, and it has little that is rational in it. But, we get the most gain from it when we look at **the whole prospect of Jesus** as Son of God. Like this genealogy of **too many relations**, it forces us to confront it straight on, and this is when we do best by taking it as it is given to us. And, in doing so we stand the best chance of obtaining its **deepest meaning**.

This is the first of four Sundays in **Advent**. It is the beginning of our preparation for our hearts to receive **God's gift** of Jesus Christ for our salvation: our **redemption**. Each week we will look at another aspect at this beginning to the Gospel story. Mixed with sentiment, memory, personal reflection, and wonder, we look forward to the **birth of Christ** on Christmas Day:

A day like **no other**.