***THE MESSIAH’S FAMILY TREE***

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Texts: Matthew 1:1-17 and Isaiah 11:1-10

Today would have been my dad’s 89th birthday, so maybe I was thinking ahead to that milestone or perhaps it was the reading of those first verses from Matthew’s gospel that caused me to take note of an article in the Washington Post this week entitled: *The Genealogy Boom Has hit a Roadblock*. According to the article, the nation’s immigration and citizenship agency has proposed dramatically hiking fees – as much as 500% for a single paper file – for those who want to access records from the first half of the 20th century. Included in those records are the Holocaust survivors who sought refuge during and following World War II as well as those immigrants who came through Ellis Island between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As the article notes:

*The increases come at a time when millions of Americans are discovering a passion for family genealogy, spurring the growth of websites and services that cater to them.* [*Ancestry.com*](http://ancestry.com/)*, one of the most popular, now has more than 3 million paying subscribers perusing its databases of documents and DNA connections*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

With that increased interest in genealogical research, I am sure that the 17 verses that we read this morning from the opening of Matthew’s gospel will become a favorite passage for many of you, for Matthew too took a deep interest in genealogy of a sort – not his own, but that of the messiah.

Matthew begins his gospel with the good news that Jesus ***is*** the messiah. Unlike Mark who shrouds Jesus’ identity as the messiah in secrecy, Matthew tells us right up front that Jesus is the messiah whom God has promised. He wants us to know who Jesus is as we read about how he lives, dies, and is raised in glory. So Matthew begins his book with a trip down the family tree to the roots of Jesus of Nazareth, the messiah of God. In so doing, Matthew is less concerned with precise history than he is with Jesus’ identity as the messiah. He skips a couple of generations along the way and omits a name or two. The family tree, like most family trees, has its share of nuts, weak branches, and rotten apples mixed in with those sturdy limbs and deep roots from which the messiah was to come. But deeply imbedded in this family tree is the hidden hand of God. Matthew wants us to know something about Jesus’ roots, not because of what it says about Jesus’ ancestors, but because of what it means about Jesus as God’s messiah.

The genealogy begins with Abraham; he is the seed from which the people of God grew into a mighty nation with a messianic branch. He was the desert nomad who became the patriarch of a people when he pulled up his tent pegs and left his homeland to follow God’s lead to a new, unknown place. He is the one whom God blessed with the promise of descendants more numerous than the sands on the seashore even though Abraham had no children in his old age. He is the one who laughed at the possibility of geriatric fatherhood, and then along came Isaac. The messiah’s family tree begins where God began, with this faithful patriarch of the Jewish people.

When I was a boy in Slippery Rock, PA, a neighbor boy told me that he learned at his church that Jesus wasn’t a Jew; he was a Christian, probably Baptist. I’ve heard that false claim repeated across the years by adults who should know better. Jesus was without doubt a Jew – born of Jewish parents in a Jewish community and circumcised on the 8th day. He worshiped in the synagogue and knew the Torah and prophets. He came to fulfill the hopes, dreams, and prophecies of Israel as the long-awaited messiah of God. In choosing Abraham to begin the genealogy, Matthew makes clear that Jesus’ Jewish roots are with Abraham and his descendants, for he is the promised messiah for Israel.

Yet it is also clear that Jesus comes as savior for the world, not just for Israel. Within his family tree are five women – Rahab, Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. In a patriarchal culture it is surprising to find these women mentioned. Even more surprising perhaps is that Rahab and Ruth were not even Jews! Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute living in Jericho; she offered sanctuary to two Israelite spies and helped them escape the city. In so doing Rahab affirmed her faith in the God who had brought Israel into that Promised Land. A Canaanite prostitute is hardly the ancestor from whom we would expect a messiah to be born. But God worked through her to deliver to Israel the Promised Land and to continue the growth of the messiah’s family tree.

Like Rahab, Ruth was a foreigner, a Moabite woman who remained faithful to her widowed mother-in-law Naomi; Ruth refused to leave Naomi, declaring: “*Your people shall be my people and your God my God*.” Ruth came to trust in Naomi’s God, the God of Israel. She joins the family tree as wife of Boaz and great-grandmother of King David, affirming once again that God can use anyone for God’s good purposes. The Lord is God of all people – Jews and Gentiles, Moabite women and Jericho prostitutes, princes and paupers, saints and sinners alike, which makes room in the family tree for the likes of us!

From those gentile branches of the family tree, God sends Jesus as the messiah for all people – a savior for the world, for people of all nations, races, tribes, and traditions. Jesus comes with an invitation for all to follow him, an invitation he extended again and again to the outcasts of Jewish society – to prostitutes and tax collectors, centurions and Samaritans, the lame and lepers among whom he ministered, with whom he ate, and all of whom he treated as brothers and sisters. The messiah’s kingdom is not an exclusive club; it is an open community in which all are welcome – even those who come from the fringes of society, for the messiah himself was born in a lowly stable at the edge of town with a feeding trough for a bed!

Yet within this family tree there are also kings! The dominant figure in the messiah’s family tree is David, the youngest son of Jesse who was chosen by God to be king over Israel. The messiah was promised to be from David’s royal line. As a descendant of David, Jesus was a legitimate heir to those promises. So central is David to this claim for the legitimacy of the messiah, that Matthew constructs his genealogy for Jesus as a word play on David’s name. Hebrew consonants also serve as numbers. D is the number 4. V is 6. Thus the sum of letters in David’s name (DVD in Hebrew) is 14 (DVD = 4+6+4). It is no coincidence that Matthew breaks his genealogy into three groups of fourteen, three times affirming the claim of Jesus to the throne of David. It is an emphatic numerical statement that Jesus is the messiah who is the fulfillment of God’s promise!

That connection in the family tree between Jesus and David lies, not with Mary his mother, but with Joseph his adopted father. While Mary bears the Son of God, Joseph bears the lineage through which Jesus will claim his title as Son of David. Far from being a peripheral character hidden among the shadows of the stable, Joseph is an essential link to the messianic promises of God that are fulfilled in the baby lying in the manger. Joseph may be hard to distinguish from the shepherds in your nativity set, but his role in the Christmas story is key to Jesus’ identity as the messiah!

There are lots of other interesting characters in that family tree: Jacob who stole his brother’s birthright, Josiah who renewed the people’s interest in the law and discovered the book of Deuteronomy in a dusty corner of the temple, Ahaz who was a really rotten king. Yet the one constant throughout their stories is the hand of God at work in and through their lives. Through long generations God has been faithful, even when God’s people were unfaithful, even when they abused their power and their people, even when they chose conflict over peace, even when they doubted the God who had claimed them as God’s people! God continued to work for good in their midst despite bad kings and their bad choices which suggests that God does not give up on God’s people and will not give up on us – no matter who our leaders are or how difficult the circumstances in which we find ourselves, our nation, and our world today.

It has been two thousand years since Matthew’s account of the messiah’s family tree came to a glorious end with the birth of Jesus. The good news of this season is not only that he came, but that we are invited to be part of that family tree, to enter our names in the Jesus genealogy as brothers and sisters in Christ. It is a family line that runs, not through your genes, but through your heart. On a branch far up, out near the end of a limb there is a place for your name. The tree is big enough for all of us, and its roots run so deep that nothing can tear us from it – not a storm or sickness or despair or lapses in judgment or sins or even death! For on this family tree you can live secure. Faith, hope, and love flow strong in this tree and every so often you can catch a glimpse of that peace to which all in this family tree are heirs – the peace that came to us in Bethlehem in the messiah of God who is the Prince of Peace and the savior of the world, the one of whom angels sing: *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among all God’s people!* Amen

1. Sydney Trent, Retropolis: “The Genealogy Boom Has Hit a Roadblock.” *The Washington Post*, December 5, 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)