

MATTHEW'S GENIE – ALOGY

Sermon, November 28, 2021

First Sunday of Advent

Texts: Matthew 1:1-17, Romans 15:4-13

At first glance this reading from Matthew might warm your heart about as much as reading a phone book. But trust me on this: there is a wonderful message in this opening passage of the New Testament. As I've mentioned a few times over the years, the Bible is made up of sixty-six different books, written over thousands of years, with many wildly different authors from all walks of life and a wide range of cultural backgrounds: kings, shepherds, soldiers, lawyers, scholars, ex-slaves, fishermen and, in Matthew's case, IRS agents. What makes this Bible such a beautiful work of art and literature is that there is a remarkable **unity** in its diversity. I tell the confirmation classes this every year that the central theme, the central message, of the Bible can be rather radically narrowed down to two simple words: JESUS CHRIST. THIS BOOK IS ABOUT HIM, and about what God has done, is doing, and will do through Him. He is the central figure in this sixty-six book, millennia-long drama of redemption. The Old Testament sets the stage for His arrival. The New Testament reports of this central event, and also points toward the **climactic** event in human history, when He returns to this world and the curtains of human history will close as the Director sets foot on the stage. Right from verse one, the New Testament affirms He is the One about whom the Old Testament prophets spoke and wrote. Matthew underscores that Jesus fulfilled Messianic prophecy by being a descendant of Abraham, through Isaac, through Isaac's son Jacob, from the tribe of Judah, from the family line of Jesse, of the House of David. In the next chapters, Matthew will also call attention to other fulfilled prophecies: The Messiah was to be born of a virgin (*prophesied in Isaiah*), born at Bethlehem (*Micah*), He was to be called out of Egypt (*Hosea*), preceded by a messenger (*Malachi and Isaiah*), and so on. Matthew is saying, especially in this introduction: "THIS IS YOUR GUY! This is the central figure of the Scriptures; this is the One you've been hoping for!"

Now, in Jesus' day, in order to own property in Israel, you had to show the public documents verifying your genealogy that gave you the right to live there; pedigree was important. Also, certain privileges were reserved for certain tribes ... for example, to be a priest you had to be of the tribe of Levi; you literally had to have Levi's genes (*you might say these were the original "Blue" Bloods*). The Messiah, however, was expected to come from the tribe of Levi's brother Judah. See Hebrews 7 if interested in pursuing this; suffice it to say for now, the Messiah was expected to be a different sort of priest than the others. It was prophesied He would come from Judah, not Levi, and from a certain family of Judah, the house of David. What's interesting to note is that even Jesus' bitterest critics never once questioned His descent from David. It was a matter of public record.

But it wasn't "Levi's genes" that inspired the misspelled title of the sermon, "Matthew's Genie – alogy." To quote a lyric from a rather, um, bawdy Christina Aguilera song of the '90s, "I'm a genie in a bottle, baby, You gotta rub me the right way. I'm a genie in a bottle baby come, come on and let me out!" Well, at first glance this old, dusty genealogy from Matthew may not seem like it holds much, but we got to "rub" it the right way, baby! Let's look closer, inspect it a little more thoroughly, rub it a bit, and find the wonderful **hope** proclaimed in this list of names. You see, Matthew wasn't just affirming Jesus' pedigree. I think he wants to proclaim Jesus' *mission* from the very start, which is a mission of hope, redemption and restoration, and Matthew uses an attention-getting literary device in his genealogy to do so. He includes something in his record that would immediately grasp the attention of any Jewish reader, causing the reader sit up and take notice. He includes the names of five women. Women's names were never included in genealogies of that time and place. The Jewish reader would wonder, "What's going on here? Why the ladies?" And Matthew might respond, "I'm glad you asked!" Let's look at the women included. Verse 3, Tamar. Verse 5, Rahab and Ruth. Verse 6, one he apparently doesn't want to call by name; he refers to her as "the wife of Uriah." Finally, Mary is mentioned. Each of these five have interesting stories about her entry into the family tree of Jesus.

First, Tamar. Tamar was originally the daughter-in-law of the great patriarch of the tribe of Judah, Judah himself. She was married to Judah's oldest son, Er (*yes, that really was his name; that isn't an ER-ror*). This story can be found in Genesis 38, and let's just say it's not a good story for reading to the kids at bedtime. Without going into all the PG details, we read that after Er died, the widow Tamar eventually devised a rather desperate scheme. According to the law of that day, Judah had an obligation to provide for his daughter-in-law, an obligation he rather irresponsibly failed to fulfill over a loong period of time. He basically ultimately neglected that duty and Tamar was without a provider. It was not easy for a widow to survive in that world, so Judah's irresponsibility was the catalyst that led Tamar to force Judah's hand. She dressed herself as a temple prostitute, covering her face and loitered by the road where she knew her (*now-widowed*) father-in-law would be traveling, and when Judah came by, he propositioned her. What a guy. Judah went in with her and paid for her services with one of his kid goats. She conceived twins. When Judah later heard his daughter-in-law was expecting, he flew into a self-righteous rage and wanted to have her punished, until Tamar confronted him with clear evidence of his paternity (*and hypocrisy*). As chapter 38 closes, Judah acknowledges his reprehensive acts, admits Tamar is more righteous than he (*conniving though she is*), and agrees to take care of her.

Thus, by this desperate scheme she entrapped her father-in-law into doing his duty. Out of that union twin sons were produced; Perez and Zerah are listed in verse 3.

The Bible doesn't cover anything up about its heroes; all are a mixture of sinner and saint, and quite often the "sinner" side prevails. To be sure, the Bible does not condone the at-times ungodly and even vile behavior of the godly people; it simply tells it as it is and also allows us to see the destructive consequences of such action(s). I'm getting ahead of myself a bit, but the Bible wants to make clear from the earliest pages that, while sin has grievous consequences, God's grace can and does forgive and redeem even the worse treachery and can work to restore the worst messes when His grace is sought. If you remember nothing else from this sermon, remember that God's dealings are always with actual people, not ideal people. And that's a great hope, because none of us here, including me, are ideal. God is able to use and redeem all the messy stuff of actual people to work His divine grace.

Next, Rahab. The story of Rahab can be found in Joshua 2. We are told in Joshua 2 she was a prostitute in the city of Jericho. Time won't allow a full recounting of the story, but Rahab came to sincerely believe in the God of the Israelites, and she acted on her faith by hiding the two spies from Joshua's army who had come to scout the city. Recognizing her act of faith and grateful for her assistance, Joshua's army spared her and her family when they conquered the city after Jericho's walls came a-tumblin' down. Rahab became a part of the Jewish community, and eventually entered into the lineage of Jesus by marrying Salmon, son of Nahshon. By God's grace, you might say she was thoroughly "Rahab-ilitated." Rahab became the mother of Boaz, who went on to become the grandpa of King David, because Boaz married the next woman on Matthew's list, Ruth.

Ruth. Like Rahab, Ruth was an "outsider," a foreigner; she was from the country of Moab. There is a whole book of the Bible about her. She was especially noted for being a woman of loyalty, integrity and principle; though not part of the religious community, she seems to have been a genuinely decent person. All of us know people like Ruth, people who may not be part of any church community, but who seem just as decent, considerate and dependable people of integrity as any in the church (*if not even more so*). Ruth was intensely loyal to Naomi, her Jewish mother-in-law; after both their husbands died, Ruth left her country and her home to accompany Naomi back to Israel, telling her, "*Where you go, I will go; where you stay, I will stay. Your God will be my god, and your people my people.*" And Ruth meant it; she came to faith in the God of the Israelites and joined their faith community. Like Rahab, Ruth was a foreigner, an "outsider," who married into the lineage of Jesus. Her new husband was Boaz ... who, by the way, was the godly, kind, moral, gentle, decent and principled son of the ex-prostitute from Jericho ... evidence that God had worked such a miracle of redemption in Rahab's heart that she raised this real gem and gentleman of a son.

Bathsheba. Matthew doesn't refer to her by name, but you can read of "*the wife of Uriah*" in II Samuel 11 and 12. King David saw her bathing in a rather exhibitious manner on her rooftop (*in full view of the palace*) while her husband was off at battle. David sent for her; you know the rest. Upon discovering she had conceived, David compounded his crime by arranging for the death of her husband, Uriah. Matthew wants to underscore this point ... **She was the wife of Uriah**, and David did great wrong by taking her and murdering her husband. David, Bathsheba, their families and the whole nation of Israel suffered greatly because of the consequences of all this. But again, I think Matthew wished to remind his readers God really does forgive and redeem the broken and repentant who will turn back to Him in genuine sorrow and humility. David and Bathsheba **did** so ... and one of their sons went on to be a most powerful king of Israel, a king whose name became synonymous with wisdom; Solomon.

The fifth woman, of course, is **Mary**. Gentle, faithful, quiet and obedient Mary. Note that she, too, like Bathsheba and Tamar, was with child before marriage; but hers was not conceived deceitfully or in secret. Her son was truly conceived by God Himself. Strictly speaking, there was no male who could be named as the father since God Himself conceived this child; hence, Mary's name is listed.

The genius of Matthew's genealogy is that he makes clear from the very start that in and through Jesus Christ, God is in the business of redeeming actual people ... broken, hurting, flawed human beings ... and has been doing this for centuries. Matthew wants to make clear from the get-go that this Gospel, this *good news*, which is THE central theme of the sixty-six books of Scripture, this is for **everybody**. The Gospel is certainly for those who are part of the religious community, like Tamar and Bathsheba, who perhaps should have known better but made a mess of things with desperate actions and rash decisions (*and sometimes with the complicity of godly people acting in rather ungodly ways*). The Gospel is also for those like Rahab who may be outsiders to the religious community living self-destructive lives perhaps because they **don't** know any better; that's all they knew how to do to survive until they learned a better Way. The Gospel is also certainly for those who, like Ruth, may be outsiders to the religious community but are basically decent and principled people, yet they do not know this God Who will take them to new heights of goodness and service. And the Gospel is certainly for those like Mary, who have quietly and faithfully tried to live faithful and obedient lives in the religious community all along ... note that she, in fact, is the one who received the greatest blessing. This Gospel is for male and female, Jew and Gentile, kings and shepherds, queens and ex-prostitutes, perpetrators and victims, natives and foreigners, you and me ... it is for **all** actual people who may be redeemable recipients of God's grace when they earnestly repent of their sin and seek to come into the "lineage" of the Family of God, through the grace of Jesus Christ, THE central figure of the Scriptures.