

## “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.”

This morning, in our reading from The Gospel of Matthew, we heard a pretty straight-forward description of the birth of Jesus. And while it's a good story — an important story even — I don't think it's the *whole* story, at least as the author of Matthew wanted to tell it.

You see, in The Gospel of Matthew, the story of the birth of Jesus is immediately preceded by a text that I think was as important to the author of Matthew as was the story of the birth of Jesus. And what precedes Matthew's version of the birth of Jesus is the genealogy of Jesus.

Now, for a lot of good reasons, we'll never hear the genealogy of Jesus being read aloud on a normal Sunday morning — and, believe me, you really don't want to hear it — but we should at least be familiar with some of the names on that list. And in a minute I'll tell you why.

The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel covers some 42 generations. That's a lot of people. And some of those people are remembered because of the great and noble things they did. However, others are famous *despite* some of the not-so-great things they did; and that's who I want to talk about this morning — a few of those ne'er-do-wells — and very briefly talk about who they were, what they did, and why that's important.

First, there's **Jacob**. As the younger son of Isaac, Jacob manages to finagle his older brother's birthright in exchange for a bowl of stew. And then later on, Jacob tricks his father into giving him the blessing that should have gone to his older brother. So, even though Jacob was one of the great patriarchs of our spiritual history, he could also be a conniving jerk.

And then there was **Tamar**. She was the twice-widowed daughter-in-law of Judah. And when Judah decides not to risk a *third* son on her — because he thinks that Tamar must be cursed by God to have lost two husbands — Tamar dresses up like a floozy and tricks her father-in-law into having “relations” with her, and getting her pregnant. Even though they were merely in-laws, that was still considered incest.

Next, there's **Rahab**. She was an actual prostitute, but she won the favor of the Israelites when she helped them capture the city of Jericho.

And there's **Ruth**. There's a book of the Bible named for her. After she was widowed, she seduced a man named Boaz and more-or-less forced him into marrying her.

Next, there's **King David**. Even though he was considered to be the greatest of the kings of Israel, he was also a murderer, an adulterer, and a liar.

Finally, there's **Manasseh**. (Not the same Manasseh mentioned in our psalm this morning.) He was considered to be one of the worst kings of Israel. Throughout his long reign, he turned his back on the religion of his ancestors — he forswore the worship of Yahweh — and instead helped to establish the worship of pagan gods like Baal and Asherah in Israel.

So, these are some of the people included in the family tree of Jesus. Or, in other words, the author of Matthew decided to open his gospel — his collection of stories about Jesus — by telling us that Jesus had descended from

the dishonesty of Jacob,

the incest of Tamar,

the prostitution of Rahab,

the seduction of Ruth,

the murder, adultery and lies of King David,

and the unfaithfulness and apostasy of Manasseh.

For me, all this begs the question: Why would Matthew begin his account of the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, by referencing the foibles and failings of his ancestors?

The answer, I think, is because Matthew — as well as so many of the early followers of Jesus — realized that all of the moral failures of the people who preceded Jesus, did not stop God from achieving his purpose.

In fact, it was their *experience* that God can bring something holy out of *any* human shortcoming, inadequacy, or evil.

And so, here's the thing: if God didn't bail on any of those people — and some of them were awful — neither will God bail on you or me because of our mistakes.

The point that Matthew was trying to make, is this: the grace of God revealed in Jesus, reaches farther than our deepest vices; and thereby sets us free to extend that same grace to others.

And, when we see the way that God has loved us by emptying himself, then we are empowered to love others in this same way.

In the end, Matthew's message is that *no one* is outside the love of God, that *no one* is beyond redemption, and that God never gives up on this world — rather, God chose to enter into the messy human experience as Jesus, in order to reconcile the world to himself.

And that is, in part, what Christmas is all about; and that, my friends, is Good News indeed.

Amen.