

The Beginning of the Story

Matthew 1:1-17

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on the Second Sunday of Advent, December 4, 2016]

I

Here are your instructions:

You are to tell someone who knows absolutely nothing about Christianity the basic story of Jesus Christ.

You are to help that person understand the "Reason for the Season" we call Christmas.

Where would you begin?

Some of you would no doubt begin with the birth of Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem, with the good news announced by the angel to a group of shepherds.

Some of you would begin with John the Baptist,
the one who came to prepare the way for the coming of Messiah.

A few of you might begin with...Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River,
his first miracle,
his first sermon;
his death and his resurrection.

Some of you wouldn't have a clue where to begin!

Where would you start if you were to tell the story of Jesus to someone who knew nothing about it?

If I were a betting man (which I'm not),
I'd bet a dollar to a dime that not a single one of you
would begin the story where Matthew begins his story.

II

Matthew, chapter one, verse one.

The first line of the first page of the New Testament begins with a majestic assertion:

"The story of the beginning (or origin, or genesis) of Jesus the Christ, son of David, son of Abraham."

For Matthew, the story of Jesus starts not with Mary and Joseph, but with Abraham begetting Isaac.

In other words, Jesus' story begins with—
 Hebrew patriarchs,
 Judean kings,
 and numerous lesser-known Israelites down through the centuries
 who together set the stage for the coming of the Son of God.

Few of us today would even think to begin the story of Jesus the way Matthew begins it.

And this points up something that is all too easily overlooked,
 something many,
 if not most,
 Christians have forgotten.

The origin of Jesus is in the faith experience of the Hebrew people of the Old Testament.

The fact that we so easily overlook the Hebrew roots of our faith is in indication of just how far we have moved from our ancestors' understanding of that faith.

Jesus was Jewish
 (that comes as a surprise to some Christians)...
 and Jesus' life was totally immersed in the faith of his people.

The Christian faith is rooted in Judaism and would not exist without it.

That alone is good reason to read these names in church—
at least once every 20 or 30 years!

For there is more than history in these 17 verses—
there is gospel...
there is good news!

Far from it being a boring list of names
(the "begets," as they are called),
this genealogy contains some of the essential truths of the Christian faith.

So let us dig in to look for those truths and listen for them
as today we consider "The Beginning of the Story."

III

We begin by noticing that Matthew's genealogy consists of three groups of fourteen names each:

From Abraham to King David,
from King David to the time of the exile in Babylon,
and from the exile to Jesus.

The first group of fourteen consists of the patriarchs—
from Abraham, who journeyed in search of the promised land,
to David, who ruled as king over that land.

Verse 2: *"Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob,
and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers."*

Here we find a series of puzzling questions.

Abraham, you will recall, had two sons—
Ishmael was the older (his mother was Hagar),
and Isaac was the younger (his mother was Sarah).

Isaac also had two sons--
Esau, who sold his birthright to his brother Jacob for a bowl of soup,
and Jacob, who was a liar and a cheat.

And then we read that Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.

Jacob had 12 sons, and they become the leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel.

His next-to-the-youngest son, Joseph, was probably the greatest.

He possessed the ability to interpret dreams.

Sold into slavery by his brothers, he rose to become the prime minister of Egypt.

In the face of a severe famine he saved his family from starvation.

Why does the Messiah descend from Judah?

He is not the oldest nor is he the best.

His brother Joseph is clearly the more gifted.

So we are forced to ask:

Why Isaac instead of Ishmael?

Why Jacob instead of Esau?

Why not Joseph, instead of Judah and his brothers?

Here we find illustrated the truth that God does not always choose...

the brightest and the best,
the noble and the saintly.

Matthew's genealogy proclaims that God is not controlled by human merit,
but God chooses whomever God will to carry out God's purposes.

God's grace is manifested in unpredictable ways through unlikely persons.

As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:26-29):

"Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise

by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God."

This is indeed the beginning of the story of Jesus...

Jesus, who will preach salvation to tax collectors and sinners;

Jesus, who will spend time with prostitutes and pimps;

Jesus, who will explain that he came to call sinners,
and not the righteous,
to repentance;

Jesus who will ultimately die for you and me
"while we were yet sinners." (Romans 5:8)

It is a story with far more sinners than saints.

It is a story written with the crooked lines of liars,
betrayers,
and the immoral
rather than with the straight lines of the pious,
the holy,
and the religious.

God chose the most unlikely people to be a part of the Christmas story.

That same God has chosen you and me to share in the gift of life,
so that the story of Jesus becomes our story.

IV

We turn to the second list of 14 names prepared to be lifted to a higher plane.

Abraham began the first list with no land, but only a promise.

The second list begins with David, who unites and rules the Promised Land.

This second list follows with his descendants, the royal House of David.

And while we may be tempted to think:

“what a wonderful thing that Jesus came from such a noble line of rulers,”
we need to be aware that of the 14 kings who are mentioned after David,

only two—

Hezekiah and Josiah—

were considered good kings who were faithful to God’s law.

The rest were an odd assortment of power-hungry, lust-driven idolaters,
murderers, and incompetents,

who were more often found in the harem than in the temple.

David himself was a stunning combination of saint and sinner.

We remember, of course, his personal piety and the many Psalms that bear his name.

We recall that he was "a man after God's own heart,"

the youngest of the eight sons of Jesse,

who was called by God and anointed by the prophet Samuel
to be king over Israel.

But we also remember...

How he committed adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged for the
murder of her husband Uriah the Hittite so that he could possess her legally.

How he conducted the affairs of state like a Tony Soprano,
arranging for the "disappearance" of his opponents,
often at the hands of his own relatives.

How he faced conflicts and intrigue within his own family,
including a coup attempt carried out by his son Absalom that ended in
tragedy.

And here is the point Matthew makes—even corrupt and incompetent rulers are
part of the story of the birth of Jesus Christ.

God worked through those rulers,
as inept as they were,
and God continues to work through those whom we least expect.

God can work through questionable individuals—
like Jacob and Judah and David.

God can also work through corrupt and self-serving institutions, organizations,
structures, and hierarchies.

So the beginning of the story of Jesus not only includes individuals like the
patriarchs who possessed strengths and weaknesses.

It also includes kings who were weak, corrupt, and incompetent.

This story is a reminder to us of our own human frailty and weakness,
indeed, a reminder of the weakness of all human institutions—
including the church.

Some evangelical Christians have utilized a version of this argument to explain
their support of Donald Trump in last month's election—
that is, if God can use corrupt OT rulers to bring about God's purposes,
than perhaps Mr. Trump is God's chosen vessel for such a time as
this.

I have to confess that I have a hard time wrapping my head around that argument,
but if it helps you to make sense of things,
then I say, more power to you.

Certainly we can and should be praying for our next president,
that he will rise above the level of those OT rulers...

that he will be open to God's wisdom and leading;

that he will be able to sublimate his darker impulses;

that he will grow as a leader of compassion, wisdom, and foresight;

record from that time.

None of them made "Who's Who in Jewish Religion."

None of them was ever credited with any achievements worth noting.

In other words, we have moved from a cast of Bible "celebrities" (like Abraham and David) to a list of nobodies.

And this may be our greatest challenge...

Greater than believing God works through people who are not saints...

Greater than believing God works through corrupt rulers and corrupt institutions...

Believing that God can work through the unknown.

But isn't this one of the strongest themes of the Christmas story?

How God chose a couple of nobodies named Mary and Joseph,
sent them to a nothing place called Bethlehem,
where they gave birth in the lowliest of circumstances.

How the news was announced to a motley band of shepherds.

And then to top it off,
how some wacky astrologers from the east wandered in
and offered some rather odd gifts.

How Jesus was marked for death by a cruel despot,
and so his parents were forced to flee their home,
becoming refugees in a foreign land.

And when we consider Jesus himself,
there was nothing particularly remarkable about his life.

Raised in a back-water town named Nazareth...

He never wrote a book.

He never held an office.

He never owned a home.

He never had a family.

He never went off to college.

He never put his foot inside a large city.

He never traveled more than 100 miles from the place where he was born.

He never did any of the things that usually accompany greatness.

He had no credentials but himself.

He had nothing to do with this world
except through the power of his divine humanity.

And yet I think it fair to say that...

all the armies that have ever marched,

all the navies that have ever set sail,

all the governments that have ever governed,

all the kings that have ever reigned,

all put together...

have not affected the life of humankind upon this earth as powerfully as has this
One Solitary Life.

VI

So, my brothers and sisters, this story,
the beginning of the story of Jesus the Christ,

is the reason we celebrate Christmas.

It did not begin in the palaces of the high and mighty,
or in the courts of the wealthy and powerful,
or in the mansions of the rich and famous.

It began with normal, everyday people like you and me...

some of whom willingly cooperated with the divine plan...

some of whom stumbled in the process...

many of whom couldn't have cared less.

And it all demonstrates that if God's grace could work through people like that...
if God could choose such people as these for the carrying out of God's
purposes...

then there is hope for you and me...

and for all the other nobodies of this world.

If God could use them, then maybe...

just maybe...

God can use you

to bring about a new advent of love and peace
in God's world!

Amen.

Sources:

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Charles W. Julian, "How Does It All Begin?" sermon preached December 2, 1990, Muncie, Indiana.