

Whose Child Is This?

Matthew 1:18-25

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 11, 2016]

I

If you were paying close attention to last Sunday's sermon, perhaps you noticed one detail of the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 that I did not mention.

It is an aspect of that passage that I left out on purpose—
 one, because of time,
 and two, because it is an appropriate transition to the second half of Matthew 1, our text this morning, verses 18-25.

What detail am I talking about?

II

Look closely at Matthew's genealogy and you can't help but notice something that is most unusual—
 the names of four women who are part of the family tree of Jesus.

Unusual because the names of women were almost never included in genealogies from the ancient world

Unusual also because of the lives of these "other women from the family of Jesus," as my seminary professor Ray Bakke described them.

Tamar (Genesis 38), who was the daughter-in-law of Judah and was married to his oldest son.

That son died and Tamar, as was the custom in order to continue the line of the dead son, married the second son.

He also died, and then Judah refused to allow his third son to take Tamar as his wife (perhaps he thought she was bad luck...or worse).

So Tamar took matters into her own hands.

She dresses as a prostitute and waits by the side of the road for Judah.

He sees her, and you can imagine what happens next—
Tamar becomes pregnant by her father-in-law.

By the standards of that day this is considered incest,
and makes for a terrible Sunday school lesson.

Tamar gave birth to twin boys—
Perez and Zerah—
and so the line that lead to Jesus continued.

Rahab (Joshua 2) was an actual prostitute who, according to one interpretation of the text, ran a brothel in the city of Jericho.

She hid the Hebrew spies, and she and her family were rescued from the city prior to its destruction by Joshua's armies.

In Hebrews 11, Rahab is cited as one of the heroes of faith.

Ruth was a woman from Moab, the daughter-in-law of Naomi.

First Naomi's husband died,
then Naomi's son, Ruth's husband, died,
leaving Naomi and Ruth without any source of support.

Ruth vowed to stay with her mother-in-law in one of the most heart-felt speeches in the Hebrew Bible.

They returned to Bethlehem and there were befriended by Boaz,
a shirt-tail relative of Naomi.

Ruth literally threw herself at Boaz's feet (some say she seduced him);
they were married and Ruth became the great-grandmother of King David.

Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11 and 12) was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of King David's most loyal soldiers.

David saw Bathsheba as she was bathing and began an affair with her.

When she became pregnant, David sought to cover up the affair by arranging for her husband Uriah to be killed in battle.

He then took Bathsheba to be one of his wives.

Their first son died, but the second son, Solomon, followed David as king, largely through his mother's influence.

Four women—

each was an outsider;

each had an element of scandal in her life;

each showed courage and boldness in the face of
oppressive circumstances.

The writer of Matthew opens his whole collection of stories about Jesus by saying that he descended from...

the incest of Tamar,

the prostitution of Rahab,

the seduction of Ruth,

and the adultery of Bathsheba.

Why would anyone open a book this way?

The reason is this: all of the moral failures of the people who preceded Jesus did not stop God from achieving his purposes.

Indeed, they all ended up being important parts of the story.

The genealogy concludes when a fifth woman is mentioned:

Mary, the mother of Jesus,

whose situation was also scandalous,

and Joseph her husband,

who risked scorn and ridicule in taking Mary to be his wife

in spite of the untoward circumstance of her pregnancy.

III

The situation that confronted Mary and Joseph was far more difficult than any of us realize.

Two families had completed their delicate negotiations through the matchmaker.

They had agreed to a formal betrothal between Mary and Joseph.

Mary was probably 15 or 16 years old.

Joseph was probably in his early 20s.

According to Jewish custom, the period of betrothal would last for a year.

Although the couple could not yet live together or engage in sexual relations, they were absolutely bound to one another as husband and wife.

The betrothal could only be broken by death or divorce.

It was during this betrothal period that Mary “was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.” (v. 18)

I can't help but wonder, who found her?

Mary's situation must have been known by some, perhaps by all:
her parents,
the village busybodies,
maybe even the local rabbi.

Joseph has to do something, but what?

He has no good options.

- He could publicly accuse Mary of adultery, and she would be at least shamed, and maybe stoned to death.
- He could marry quickly and hope people did not count the months.

- He could divorce her quietly without mentioning the grounds for divorce.

All three of these were permitted under Jewish law.

Joseph, we are told, was a righteous man,
meaning that he wanted to do what was right before God.

He did not want to cause Mary any needless pain.

At the same time he could not feel that his marriage was within the law and will of God,
for in marrying an unfaithful woman he himself would be tainted.

Finally, after many sleepless nights, Joseph came to the tortured conclusion:
he would give Mary a quiet divorce in the presence of two the witnesses required by the Law,
and he and Mary would go their separate ways.

IV

That night Joseph tossed and turned in his bed.

His plan for divorce seemed so logical,
so right,
so fair.

Why then did he feel no peace about it?

Finally he drifted off to sleep, and woke with sunlight streaming into his room.

And then he began to recall—
dimly at first, then more clearly,
a dream.

In the dream an angel spoke to him and said,

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife,

for the child conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Have you ever noticed how in the Bible whenever an angel appears, its first words are always “Do not be afraid”?

Seeing an angel is frightening enough, but it seems just as likely that angels encounter people in situations in which they are already frightened.

Joseph in Matthew’s gospel and Mary in Luke’s are no exception.

On the cusp of marriage, they find themselves with a pregnancy they didn’t seek or expect.

The very existence of this child may well threaten their place in the community, their synagogue, and their families.

Their own relationship may be broken before it even begins.

In the face of this new beginning, fear certainly seems reasonable.

But things aren’t always as they seem.

Matthew’s genealogy underscores that the more things change,
the more they stay the same.

God has always worked through messy and broken families,
restoring them and bringing them hope.

Isaac will not be sacrificed...

Judah will have sons...

Rahab will save the people...

Ruth will be acclaimed a matriarch
by a people not her own.

God makes a habit of choosing the second son,
the barren woman,
the one who seemed beyond redeeming.

There truly is nothing new under the sun.

And for proof, God will help Joseph, son of Jacob,
 in the same way that God helped an earlier Joseph, son of Jacob.

As with the earlier Joseph, a dream will illuminate an escape from shame
 and humiliation

God will provide a path to salvation consistent with what has come before.

Joseph awakes from his dream and runs to tell Mary that he now understood
 what she knew to be true—

 that God had worked in her in some special, marvelous way;
 that the child she would bear would be the Savior of the world.

They would proceed with the wedding.

And so probably not more than a week or two later,
 after a modest wedding and marriage feast,
 Joseph took Mary to his small home in the back of the carpenter's shop.

But, as Matthew tells us, "*He had no marital relations with her until she had
 borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*"

V

Joseph is the unsung hero of Matthew's version of the nativity.

He is a hero not because he was a great leader,
 not because he was a person of power like his forefather King David,
 but because he was a righteous man who sought to do the will of God.

In Matthew's telling, Joseph is crucial to the Christmas story.

He is, as one writer puts it, the **practical dreamer**,
 who faithfully follows the law of God,
 who is sensitive to Mary
 who is concerned to prevent her public disgrace,
 who responds to the divine revelation of the
 dream with prompt obedience.

As Jesus' legal father, Joseph is a fitting role model of faith, courage, and honor in his relationship with Mary and with God.

In order to understand the question, "Whose child is this?"
we must first ask, "Who is his father?"

Matthew gives us the answer—
Joseph, the righteous one,
who was not afraid to take Mary as his wife,
and who gave the child the name "Jesus"
according to the angel's command.

Joseph is the legal father of this child, as Jesus' ancestry is traced back through Joseph to David.

The first point of the identity of divinity is this:
Jesus is the son of David.

The question is frequently asked:
How can Joseph be Jesus' father if Joseph did not beget him?

1. The royal line of the Messiah had to be traced through a series of fathers to David.
2. Joseph names Jesus—"You are to name him Jesus."

Legally, Joseph is Jesus' father.

"You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Jesus is a common name, derived from Joshua, which means "the one who saves."

Just as Moses saved the Hebrew people by leading them out of bondage in Egypt and was succeeded by Joshua who completed the work by leading the people into the Promised Land,

so Jesus would be the Savior not only of his own people,
but also of all nations,
to lead them from the bondage of sin
to the promise of eternal life.

So the second point of the identity of divinity is that **Jesus is the Savior who frees us from sin's bondage.**

The child in Mary's womb will through Joseph's act of naming be Son of David and Savior.

Yet there is an even greater identity to which Joseph cannot contribute—
 this child will be Emmanuel,
 which literally means "God-is-with-us."

To help us understand the meaning of this, Matthew turns to the ancient words of Isaiah 7:14,
 and says that Isaiah's words find their fulfillment in Jesus—
 Emmanuel,
 God with us.

So the third point of the identity of divinity is Jesus is—
Emmanuel, "God with us."

The one who is "God with us" will at the end of this gospel say to his followers,
"I am with you always to the end of the world." (28:20)

God with us—in a time of political upheaval and anxiety about the future.

God with us—in times of tragedy, sorrow, suffering.

God with us—in times of illness and death.

VI

Joseph, descendent of David...
 husband of Mary...
 father of Jesus the Christ.

How easy it is to ignore him,
 to overlook his crucial contribution to the story of Christmas.

After all, he is never quoted in the gospels.

He completely disappears from view following Jesus' childhood.

His Christmas gift to us is his realization that this Child did not belong to him, but he belonged to this Child.

I recall somewhere reading the story of a mother who had spent most of her life loving and caring for a daughter who had been born with Down's syndrome.

She said, *"My child is the best, worst thing that ever happened to me in my life."*

She went on to explain that after the birth of her child, her husband had left them—"He couldn't handle it," she said.

Her life had to be totally reorganized around the care of her daughter.

Every day of her life was consumed with concern for the future of her little girl.

And yet, her little girl had been a great gift to her, bringing into her life unrestrained, complete love.

The daughter had given her mother's life great meaning and purpose.

I can't help but think that Joseph would have understood what that mother meant when she said,

"My child is the best, worst thing that ever happened to me in my life."

VII

It was Joseph's faithfulness,
 his willingness to risk shame and ridicule,
 that enabled God's story of grace and redemption to reach its
 culmination in the birth of God's Son into the world

And now each of us here today is part of that story.

Through the waters of baptism, Jesus becomes our elder brother and we become children of God.

Just as God enters into the story of Abraham's family,
so God enters into our own families.

Our family trees,
our genealogies—
with their complexity,
their secrets,
their shame—
are now part of Jesus' story too

Abraham and Isaac,
Jacob and Joseph,
Tamar and Rahab,
Ruth and Bathsheba,
Mary and Joseph—
none of them is beyond God's capacity to love and to save.

And neither are we.

Christmas is our confirmation of this truth.

And so in these remaining days of Advent, let us look with hope and
expectation for God's new beginning...
so that the Child who was born into Mary and Joseph's family
can be born into ours.

May God help each of us here today to live as Joseph lived—
fully devoted to the Son whom he so wisely raised.

God will make this world new through him—
and because of him, through us.

Amen.

Sources:

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C.S. Gockel, "Who Is This Child?" a sermon preached December 18, 2002, Monroe, Ohio.