

“Matthew: A Scandalous Conception”
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First Congregational Church Camden, Maine

Matthew 1:18-25

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

When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be pregnant from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

“Look, the virgin shall become pregnant and give birth to a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus.

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As many of you know, I was born and raised in Australia. As were my parents. After coming to this country, which we did when I was a teenager, I realized that Americans are much more interested in their genealogies. Australians are always afraid that they are descents of convicts rather than religious pilgrims! Between 1788 & 1863 almost half of those who originally settled Australia in the late 1700’s early 1800’s were convicts. It’s very possible that one in five Australians are descendants of convicts.

Best to leave the genealogical question unanswered!

Matthew is more like you Americans. He begins his account of the life of Jesus with an extensive, albeit selective, genealogy. I had thought about making it one of the readings for this morning – but I was afraid I would lose you by the time I got to Perez the father of Hezron and Hezron the father of Aram and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father Nahshon...and I was afraid you would be long gone some 30 generations later when I got to Jechoniah the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, who was the father of Abiud.... Well, you get the picture...and this goes on for 42 generations in all...from Abraham to Joseph...taking up the first 17 verses of the first chapter of Matthew...right up to where our reading begins...this is hands down skippable text.

Or is it?

Bear with me for a few minutes before we take up those all too familiar verses that come right after the Matthew’s genealogy. I don’t have time to go into the many notable things concerning

WHO is included. However, I do want to focus on perhaps the most surprising thing about Matthew's genealogy. And that is the inclusion of several women.

When women appear in a genealogy it is downright deliberate and jolting because in biblical genealogies men are regarded as the crucial, the essential link between generations. As remarkable as it is that women are included, it is even more remarkable to note which women are included.

If women were to be named, one would assume it would be the most important, the most revered, the matriarchs in the biblical story: such as Sarah, Leah, Rebekah, or Rachel, the wives of the Patriarchs. But no, they are not the ones named. Actually, the four women named don't come close to possessing matriarchal status.

Bear with me here as I tell you just a little about each of the women selected and named as part of the genealogy of Jesus – each of whom has a story that the recollection of their names would surely evoke in Matthew's readers.

**First there's Tamar**, she is a Canaanite, not Jewish, an outsider. She was left childless by the death of her first and second husbands, both sons of Judah. When Judah failed to provide Tamar a third son to be her husband (which he was bound by the Law to do) – Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced Judah himself. She becomes pregnant and reveals that Judah is the father. It is this son, born to Tamar and Judah, who carries forward the lineage of Jesus.

**Then there's Rahab**, also a Canaanite...she was a prostitute but is remembered for her kindness and courage for protecting Israelite spies when they were scouting out the city of Jericho before the Israelite conquest of that city. She marries Salmon and bears a son who carries forward the lineage of Jesus.

**That brings us to Ruth**...also not Israelite, she is a Moabite who was left destitute after the untimely death of her husband...alone and destitute, she is resilient and determined and pursues Boaz, a distant relative, (literally throws herself at his feet) who takes her as his wife, rescuing her from a life of poverty. She too bears a son who carries forward the lineage of Jesus.

**Then, finally, there is the wife of Uriah, the Hittite, Bathsheba.** (Interesting that Matthew does not call her by name – perhaps a sign of just how controversial, at least in his eyes, her inclusion was.) It was with Bathsheba that King David committed adultery and, subsequently, conspired to have Uriah, killed so he could take Bathsheba as his wife. It is from this union is born a son, Solomon, who carries forward the lineage of Jesus.

All of these women had a complicated history of scandal or scorn...they were all by birth or marriage outsiders to the Israelite community...but also, in their own ways demonstrated remarkable courage, resilience, determination, and faithfulness...and each of them were crucial links in the unfolding story of the birth of Jesus.

I need to add that there is a 5th and final woman named in the genealogy: Mary – a young, pregnant, unmarried woman who is taken in by her fiancé Joseph who eventually claims her as

his wife and claims her son as his own...and gives him the name Jesus. All five of these women have a marital history that contained elements of scandal and scorn. All of them are indispensable links in the sacred story of the Genesis of Jesus.

This birth story, like humanity, is complicated in all kinds of ways. Over the centuries, the church has labored to idealize...scrub Jesus' legacy...protect it, keep it pure and unstained. In the 500's, the Church officially pronounces the "Immaculate Conception" of Mary (born without sin) and in the 1800's, the Church officially pronounces Mary's "perpetual virginity." From this genealogy, it appears that God is MUCH LESS concerned about his legacy.

You think you know what God is up to...that we have God's ways all figured out...that we know how God works out God's ways in history...and we recognize the kind of person God chooses to carry forward his purposes...this story should give us all pause...it includes the complicated lives of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba...and Mary. If we let the story speak, if we listen to how Matthew sets up the story...it speaks of a scandalous conception...

According to Matthew, this is the beginning of the Good News of God...of the one who is to be called, Emmanuel, God with us...with us in our humanity in and with all its complications.

Does your life feel complicated?

Are there loose ends dangling that you cannot imagine ever being tied up in any way that would resemble a story worthy of being called holy?

Has your life taken turns that tempt you to think that you are no longer worthy of being called blessed let alone holy?

Maybe, just maybe, we can hear our names being spoken, our messy stories included...not forgotten, or disqualified or cast aside...but remembered and redeemed as part of God's mysterious way of weaving us and all into the sacred story of redemption.

I have talked often of how Jesus's harshest words were reserved for those who considered themselves to be "righteous" – those who had no hesitation identifying and condemning those they were sure God regarded as unrighteous, unworthy of inclusion in the family of God.,,all the time justifying their judgements on the letter of the Law. They could quote scripture and verse. They were great proof texters.

Here's just one example from Matthew's Gospel of how Jesus spoke to those who were so certain of their righteousness:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like **whitewashed** tombs, which on the outside look beautiful but inside are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of uncleanness." (Matthew 23:27)

An aside: Whenever you here a lot of talk about how obedience to the Law justifies treatment of others that is cruel, degrading, harmful, and inhumane...alarm bells should be going off for those of us who are part of the legacy of Jesus...

Jesus was roundly condemned for his embrace women and men and children and included them in company. In contrast the religious leaders of his day, he seemed to have a whole different take on the redemption work that God was up to.

If we take Matthew's account at face value, it's not hard for us to imagine where Jesus first learned such an understanding of God...and of what God's righteousness looked like.

Before he could even read...it's not hard to imagine Mary telling Jesus about his father, Joseph. Perhaps it was Mary who, from his earliest days, told him again and again of how complicated, mysterious, and sacred, his own beginnings were and how his father, Joseph, a truly righteous man, broke the Law in order to protect her and the child she was carrying from scandal and scorn and rejection...and how his father did it because he was sure that an Angel of God had spoken to him...

It's not hard to imagine Mary instilling this awareness into her son, and telling him in no uncertain terms, "This is the story you were born to tell...this is why your father named you Jesus....yours is a story of the Good News of the salvation of God."

That, my friends, is the Good News that has brought us here. Thanks be to God. Amen.