

“From Generation to Generation: There’s Room for Every Story”
Matthew 1:1-17

A couple of weeks ago, there was an interesting story in the news about the actor Chris Hemsworth and how he discovered as part of his new show “Limitless” that genetically he has a high chance of developing Alzheimer’s disease. It is not the kind of news one would like to get at age 39 when he feels at the prime of his life. Here is a clip about what he has been sharing about this new information: https://youtu.be/3i_GcNxc4UY. This story caught my attention as I was thinking about our Advent theme: “From Generation to Generation.” We are looking at what is in our spiritual genes by revisiting our story of origin, the story of who we are in the heart of God. Each of our stories is unique and individual in its own way, and yet all of our stories have a common divine thread running through them. This soul knowledge is passed on from one generation to the next. Even though we may get disease and other negative traits from the generations before us, we also get love, faith, and our connection to God’s story.

This was the way the author of the Gospel of Matthew chose to position the story of Jesus. The Gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus. Even though it is a boring part of the story of Jesus, it is an important part of this Gospel. The author tries to connect Jesus back to the great ancestors of the people of Israel like David and Abraham. He tries to tell his readers that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah they had been waiting for and his lineage is evidence of that. Genealogies were very important to the Jews at the time of Jesus. For example, in order for a man to be a priest, it was important to establish that he came from an unbroken line of priests (the tribe of Levi). Even if a woman was to marry a priest, her genealogy would have to show that she was purely Jewish for at least five generations. Also, many predictions in the Hebrew scriptures showed that the Messiah would come from the line of David.

At the same time, we hear about how Jesus is a descendant of Abraham and King David, the author of Matthew does an amazing thing. Jesus’ lineage and connection to the line of David is through adoption by his stepfather Joseph. In addition, the author highlights some “foreign” women as an important part of his lineage. It is highly unusual to include women in a genealogy in a very patriarchal culture. Highlighting foreign women would have been considered scandalous. In the artwork for this sermon series, we see the women in Jesus’ lineage represented by things they are carrying. Let’s take a look:



This art was created by Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman who explains about the women in the drawing: “In the bottom left, Tamar holds her father-in-law’s insignia, which represents how she assumes his role as the leader of the tribe of Judah and continues its lineage. Moving counterclockwise, Rahab holds the red cord which she lowered to ensure the safety of her family after supplying Israelite spies enough information to achieve victory in Jericho. Next, Ruth holds the wheat that she gleaned from the field. She knows that she must marry again in order to be protected, and so she takes initiative with Boaz. Bathsheba’s name isn’t even mentioned in Christ’s genealogy; she is referred to as the “wife of Uriah.” She withstands abuse from King David, survives the murder of her husband, and ensures that her son Solomon takes the throne. She takes matters into her own hands, becoming, as scholar Dr. Wil Gafney writes, ‘the queen mother of the united monarchy of Israel.’ Finally, there is Mary who looks adoringly at the rose which represents her son. Here she holds the love and pride of a beautiful lineage that leads to the birth of her son, the Messiah.”

So we hear in the genealogy about Tamar the Adullamite who was taken by her father-in-law as a prostitute (Genesis 38:15), Rahab the Canaanite prostitute

(Joshua 2:1) who helps Israelite spies, Ruth the Moabite who marries Boaz to help her mother-in-law (Ruth 3), Bathsheba the wife of Uriah the Hittite whom David forces into adultery, and Mary, pregnant before her marriage to her betrothed Joseph.

This is a rather unusual way of presenting a genealogy. There are many scholarly speculations about the motivations of the Gospel writer, but today I would like to invite us to consider how his choice of including the unique and universal lineage of Jesus is a model for us in understanding ourselves and our human connections. On the one hand, we are unique because of things like our cultures, heritage, language, religion, gender, and family stories. We are uniquely who we are because of these things that make us different and that is something to be celebrated and understood. At the same time, according to the good news of Jesus, we are also universally connected to all the people of the earth through our common humanity. Each story belongs in God's story. There's room for every story! Even on the genetic level, there is no unique race but the human race. The things that hold us together with other human beings are far greater than the things that make us different. Our stories are connected, and all belong in the story of God's creation. There is no part that does not belong. Even the failures and betrayals are always redeemed through God's love. Those who are considered outsiders are insiders in God's story.

We all belong and are important for the whole story. The stories of our ancestors are important, and our own stories are also needed for the unfolding story of love. Our unique roots and our ancestors matter. Yet, the future generations to come after us matter. We celebrate our past, but we also look to how God is calling us into the future. We are part of this large web of humanity that includes not just our time, but eternity as well.

I want to invite you to consider your life in two different ways. These are adapted by Margaret Silf in her book *Close to the Heart*. The first way is to look at your lifetime in connection to the stories of our faith and the story of God's redemption and love in our human life as witnessed to in Scripture. Put landmark events from your life next to the parts that connect with you. These landmarks of your life are a map of the way God is bringing you, mile by mile, to the fullness of your life.

Garden of Eden Times: You too have known the joys of the first paradise and the pain of alienation from true self.

Slavery in Egypt and Exodus: You have likely known personal captivities, spent seasons in the desert, made your own exodus, crossed to a promised land.

The Law of Moses & the Ten Commandments: You have learned the rules of what it means to be disciplined and the grace of what it means to be loved.

Babylonian Captivity, Exile, and Return: You have lamented and rejoiced, been faithful and unfaithful. You have trusted, doubted, rebelled, but kept on going.

The Prophets & the Word of God: You have heard/read words of inspiration and have felt the nudges of God in your life. Sometimes you listened and followed, while other times you doubted or ignored God's call to you.

The story of Jesus: You have felt God's presence in your life and in our world in your own being and in the suffering of our world. You have followed the way of love and you have also stumbled on the path.

The story of God's love: Everything you have experienced in your search for God and for meaning is recorded there in the words of the prophets about the struggles and the triumphs of the people of ancient Israel and of the whole human family.

The second way of looking at your story is to look at the visible and invisible life story. Begin by making a note of the important events in your life: your birth, your first year of school, changes of school, college, jobs, important relationships, marriage, birth of children, grandchildren, the names of friends, places you have lived, holidays you especially remember, and major life events. You can call this the visible side of your timeline. Then turn to the invisible side of your story –those things that no outside observer would notice but that might turn out to be the most significant things of all. This part requires prayer. Don't try to force your own memory but turn to God's grace to bring you to an awareness of what God is inviting you to remember. Some examples of these inner landmarks might be: events or encounters that caused some change of heart and made you see things from a different perspective; moments when perhaps the world stood still for you, and you felt touched by God; times of particular darkness when you felt abandoned; or seasons during which wise people have profoundly influenced your inner journey.

In both exercises the invitation is the same: To see our unique stories interwoven into God's large story!

We will close with a Lectio Divina time using the words of Psalm 90:1, "Lord, you have been our dwelling-place from generation to generation." Amen.