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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 1:1-17
“Gospel Introductions: Naming our History”

How do you begin to tell the story of Jesus Christ, the Son of God? What are the best opening lines to use to describe the central story of our faith? In our bible, four gospel writers faced that challenge. Matthew chose to begin his gospel with a genealogy: a list of Jesus’ ancestors going back to venerable Father Abraham. It is a long list of names that you almost never hear read during worship, because no one wants to pronounce them all, and few believe there is much to be learned from a dusty, old genealogy. And yet it is one of the most relevant things we could focus on in today’s foundation-less society, and one of the best ways to open the story that changed history for all time.

Many people watch the television show “Hoarders.” It tells about the lives of people whose homes are so full of stuff that it is almost impossible for them to move around. This show fascinates us, not because these people are so different from us, but because we see glimpses of our own personality in their behavior. “There but for the grace of God and the lack of more closet space go I.” We all hang onto stuff. Our basements and attics are full of things we can’t bear to toss out: things we think might be useful again some day; things that evoke memories we’d like to hang onto.

What is true for us individually is also true for us as a society. We are historical hoarders; whatever we have been, in some way we are still. Author Diane Ackerman has said that we are “nomads constantly on the move, carrying everything with us, all we possess. We carry the seed and nails and remembered hardships of everywhere we have lived; the beliefs and hurts and bones of every ancestor. Our baggage is heavy.”¹ Another person has commented that “the past is strapped to our backs. We do not have to see it; we can always feel it.”²

Whatever we have been, in some way we are still.³ We don’t like to name that fact, and modern culture with its fixation on youth and “what’s happening now” and the “next great thing” yawns in our face when we bring up the old wisdom from Ecclesiastes that “there is nothing new under the sun.” (Eccl 1:9) But we carry our history with us – all of it. And the bad parts, the times of brokenness, violence, racism, and fear, are especially heavy. Why is that? Because the bad times are often wrapped with layers of secrecy; thick woolen blankets that keep it in the dark and greatly increase the weight we must carry. Only by telling our secrets, by unwrapping and bringing them to light, no matter how painful or embarrassing, can our load be lightened. It’s true for us as individuals. It’s true for us as families. It’s true for colleges and state universities and churches and governments and people of all tribes and nations.

Now, on the surface, it doesn't appear that Matthew has followed this advice. He pulled together a list of Jesus' ancestors, clustered in groups from Abraham up to King David, then from David to the time of exile in Babylon, and then from the release from Babylon up to the birth of the Messiah. It's a long list of kings and patriarchs. But wait! Tucked within the genealogy are references to four women. *Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar; Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab; Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth; and David the father of Solomon by Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah.* Without those women's names, you'd only have a genealogy of patriarchal power: heads of families, kings on thrones, testosterone run amok. But add in the women's stories and now both secrets and male frailties come to light. Tamar, unable to become pregnant by her husband, had to dress up like a prostitute and trick her father-in-law to sleep with her so that the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob wouldn't stop prematurely. Rahab, a literal prostitute from life's margins whose bravery allowed Joshua to conquer Jericho and win the first part of the Promised Land for the Israelites. Ruth, the powerless immigrant girl who had to crawl under the blanket of a tipsy Boaz to finally convince him to do what was right by both her and her mother-in-law Naomi. And Bathsheba, the woman taken by David in adultery, one of his most dishonorable acts that led to the eventual murder of Bathsheba's virtuous husband, Uriah, when David tried to cover up his sins of abuse.

Matthew starts the story of Jesus with a genealogy that names kings and patriarchs but also includes these women, ensuring that their stories will be re-told over and over again. By doing so, the historical baggage is unpacked; the lessons of the past can be learnt from; and even more importantly, the providence and power of God are shown to be stronger than human frailty, human folly, and human failings.

Now as a modern application of this point, compare the honesty of Matthew's genealogy with the secrecy and disarray we witnessed from leaders at Penn State. (And, yes, we should talk about this in church because it is still so much in the news around us; there were three stories in yesterday's paper alone.) What happened at Penn State would have been messy and ugly whenever and however the abusive behavior of Coach Sandusky came to light. But it was made much, much worse by the layers of secrecy and willful deceit wrapped around these instances of child abuse and rape. I'm sorry; it is not a comfortable topic. But as the father of 10 year old and 12 year old children, the ages of Sandusky's victims, I have no desire to mince words here. If the assistant coach had been caught in the shower with a young girl, I pray that any witness to the event would have rescued the child and taken immediate and direct action.⁴ The fact that witnesses didn't act because it involved a young boy, not a young girl, is simply inexcusable. The fact that euphemisms like "horsing around" can be tossed about in this case is disingenuous and dangerous. Children cannot give consent to sexual behavior inflicted on them by adults. When unwanted sexual contact is inflicted upon a minor, it is abuse and rape and should be named as such. Our inability to do that, to name these acts honestly and challenge destructive

patterns of cover-up and secrecy means that scores of young boys and young girls are carrying their abuse and wounds within them for years, like heavy baggage, all because it is something that isn't talked about. The weight of painful history comes less from the acts themselves and more from our inability to name it honestly, to learn from it humbly, and to promise ourselves "never again" with a firm conviction that accompanies every re-telling of these sad stories to our children's generations.

Matthew had the boldness to go back to the very beginning. The first book of the Old Testament begins with the Hebrew word *b'reishit*, which is translated into Greek as the word "genesis," both of which mean "the beginning." Matthew opens with a similar phrase, *biblos genesis*, the book of genesis part II; a genealogy of Jesus the Christ. Matthew then summarizes the whole story through his genealogy. There was Abraham; remember Abraham and Sarah both laughing when told they would have a child at their advanced ages, but along came Isaac, Son of Laughter. Then Jacob and Judah, and how the line would have been broken were it not for Tamar, making a way out of no way. Don't forget Rahab dropping her scarlet cord out her window so Joshua could conquer Jericho. Or Ruth the foreign girl making her vow to Naomi saying "Where you go, I will go; your people shall be my people and your God my God." Such loyalty. Such dedication. Oh, if only David had remembered her story before he abused his crown and stole Uriah's wife and tried to hide it from God and man. But he failed, as so often happens. He wounded others and was wounded himself, as so often happens.

But that is not the final word. Despite violence, despite war, despite times of exile and struggle, God is active: raising up men and women, parents and grandparents, teachers and leaders in our midst. And as it so often happens, God loves to surprise us by doing the biggest works of all using the most unlikely characters. A carpenter, a young girl still living with her parents, and in the fullness of time, a baby born in Palestine, Bethlehem, David's City, Abraham's descendant, the Child of God.

Before you can look to the future, you have to go back and honestly name your past. Before you can move into places of healing and trust, you have to bring into the light deeds and brokenness long kept in the shadows. Learning to do this is never easy, but scripture gives us a good place to start. Especially when the scripture we share is a gospel story, about God constantly calling us home after times of wandering in the wilderness, about God reorienting us after times of disorientation and despair, about God washing us clean with baptism waters and making us new creations altogether, and about God literally breaking into the time-bound drama of history with a timeless act of grace. For unto us a child has been born.

We carry our past with us. It need not weigh us down, though, if we hold on – not to the fears, lies, and secrets, but hold on to the honesty, the healings, the letting go, and the promises of hope that have been spoken by people of faith through the ages. That's the place to begin this Advent, as we await Christ's coming and step into his history that looks forward with joy and peace and hope forevermore.

AMEN

¹ Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of Love*, p. xxii.

² Mignon McLaughlin, quoted in the Chillicothe Ohio Gazette; in *The Week*, Nov. 24, 2011.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, p. 16.

⁴ Cf. Daniel Mendelsohn, "Secret Dread at Penn State", *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 2011, SR 4.