

The Lineage of a King

Matthew 1:18-25

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It's good to be with you again. It's been a few years. I was invited here for the men's conference more than once, and yet the Lord has had me back in the pastorate now for a decade or so and I had other duties to do than be here in Jackson, but David was so kind to invite me because it gives me opportunity in the Advent season to visit my mother who is in Memphis. So the opportunities are great to be able to be with you again.

It is your Advent time, and therefore I'll ask that you look at an Advent portion of Scripture with me, to Matthew chapter 1, Matthew chapter 1, as we consider the origins of our Lord Jesus. I say it that way to maybe connect to some things that we think about, not just this time of year but as a culture. There's a sense in which our blockbuster superhero movie culture has taught us to expect something of the origin stories of our superheroes. Always to truly understand the powers of your superhero, you have to know where they're from. Wonder Woman, of course, was molded of clay by her mother, Hippolyta, and raised on Paradise Island, taught by Amazons. Well, maybe! Of course if you're not of the generation where Wonder Woman is popular, all of us should know that Superman's original planet was the planet of Krypton, and of course his parents, as that planet was exploding, put him on a rocket capsule to find safety on Earth, despite the shards of kryptonite that would continue to threaten his mortality from time to time. If the Black Panther is your hero, you recognize he comes from a hidden African kingdom of Wakanda, where a meteorite, 10,000 years ago, deposited minerals that gave super powers.

There are origin stories of very different kinds of superheroes as well. Some of you may know that book, *The Good Neighbor*, that describes the dangerous Mister Rogers. Dangerous, because in him there was always a simmering anger to undo what was done to him in his childhood, as an overweight child was bullied and called "Fat Freddie," so that when he became an adult to defend children and told them, "You are special, just the way you are," it was more than sentiment. It was a conviction wielded to help children. And when you think of the origin stories of a Martin Luther King Jr., his civil rights development was in a seminary where he was often made fun of for sermons that were often more flourish than substance. And the consequence was that he not only developed a

greater eloquence, but also later became known for plagiarism, which did not keep him from speaking of a dream from a mountaintop, for one day, children would be judged for the quality of their character rather than the color of their skin.

As you think of those latter two examples, you begin to recognize that the comic book heroes entertain us when they come from places beyond our realities – paradise and planets a long way away. But the heroes that give us hope come from the mess we know and the mess we're in. As did Jesus. The first six verses of Matthew 1:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah.

Sometimes we wonder if Jesus can deal with the mess that we're in, and He says, "Deal with it? I came from it!"

Father, help us to see in Your Word the blessings You intend to give by the grace of Your Son. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

I saw as I drove up, the historicity of the church here – how long you've been here. How special to be a church while in a newer facility with a great history. My wife and I, to backtrack on her lineage a little bit, went back to her hometown in Germany two years ago. Her Presbyterian, not Lutheran but Presbyterian roots were in Eastern Germany and we went to the church where there were the books that still had the baptisms and the births and the burials recorded for centuries. We had to go into the new wing of the church in order to examine the books. We asked the pastor, looking around, "How new is the new wing?" And he said, "Oh, about 800 years ago it was built!" And that meant that when we looked at the books that were so old, my wife had to take out her white cotton gloves so as not to put any oil on the pages and handle them so gently. And we had to take out a magnifying glass to examine the script that was faded and also very small, recording so many names across so much time. And the more we looked, the more the details became important to us.

The Promise of Jesus

And the same is happening in the genealogy of Jesus here. We're going back almost 4,000 years in this genealogy. And if you can in your minds just imagine that you are going to handle it gently with your white cotton gloves, I'll provide the magnifying glass, as we consider some of the details of the promise and the parents and the purpose of Jesus all revealed in His origin story. If you think of the promise, you have only to look at the first verse. This is the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ. In the name is the promise. After all, "Christ" is not His last name; it is His title. He is the Christ, the Anointed One, and to understand what that means you just read the rest of the verse – "The son of David, the son of Abraham." He was the son of David. The privileged prophecies to David were that from his line there would come One who would eventually have, by the promise of God, an eternal and universal kingdom. And here He comes with the privileges of David, His, but not to be His alone. He's also son of Abraham, and we remember that by faith, Abraham received the blessing of the promise of God, that he would be a father to many nations, that whatever is the blessing of the privileges of David upon Jesus, those were to ultimately touch many nations, for those who would have the faith that Abraham had, which was to be the blessings to the nations. It has to be read that way, that you read that the action for the privilege and the promise is what God is providing. So little is said about David and Abraham in this opening verse as though there's not much else to say; they don't have much else to commend them other than it was the faith that was the cause of the blessing, as though there's nothing else that is going to be sufficient or maybe even important in terms of what will qualify them for the privileges and the promises of God.

We know it by account later on, as you think of the thief on the cross, and how important it was that we know about David and Abraham – privilege and promise – not by what you bring to the table but by what God is providing. Just imagine that thief on the cross, the one whose confession even while he is hanging there next to Jesus is that he has been a robber, that he's guilty, the one who is hanging next to him is not. He acknowledges the righteousness of Jesus and his own sin. And for that, Jesus says, "Today you will be with Me in paradise." Just imagine, with whatever is the gatekeeper on the gates of heaven, sees the thief coming. "What do you bring? Why should I let you in?" What could the thief say? "I got nothing. But I'm with Him." It becomes the testimony that we need over and over again in our lives, to say that "Whatever God promises, whatever the privileges are, I accept by faith in what He would do rather than what I have done. I got nothing!" We tease about it.

You know, it's the old, old preacher's story. The man who stands before the gates of heaven and whatever the guard is, says, "You can get in, but you need 100 points." "Well how do I get points?" "Well tell me what you've done to qualify." "Well, I was faithful to my wife for 50 years." "Really? Fifty years? Well, I'll give you 3 points." "Well, I gave \$50,000 to the church for its building

program.” “Fifty thousand? Did you really? \$50,000? Well, I’ll give you 2 points.” Says the man, “Wait? Fifty years and \$50,000 and I got 5 points? If I’m going to get in at all, it’s going to be by the grace of God!” The doorkeeper says, “Come right on in.”

The Parents of Jesus

As much as it’s the old preacher’s story is the affirmation of the Scriptures that we need, not on our good days, on the awful ones, when we know nothing qualifies us for heaven. It’s why the lineage is described as it is. We go from the promise to the parentage. In the moms that are listed, we like singing about, at least when it comes to the last one, Mary, in verse 18. But she’s not the first mother in the list. The first mother in the list is in verse 3. We read about “Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar.” And Tamar is not a name we like talking about very much. It’s one of the most horrific stories in the Bible where Judah, who was going to be the lineage-bearer of Jesus – “The scepter of his line, would not depart,” said his father when he was blessed – but despite that blessing upon Judah, despite the fact that his lineage was well in Jesus, what did Judah himself do? Well, he gave his sons to marry Tamar. They were such incorrigible men, that the Lord took the life of the first one away. And so Judah gave Tamar to the second brother and he was so awful that God took his life away. And what Judah should have done was given Tamar the third son, but he kind of went, “Wait, that one died and that one died…” And instead of looking at their evil, he thought Tamar was the bad, good luck charm, the bad luck charm, and he would not let her marry but sent her away to destitution. She, to shame him and claim her rights, paraded as a prostitute, bore a son to Judah out of an incestuous relationship from that prostitution. And when Judah wanted to burn her for bearing a child, though she was not married to one of his sons, she revealed and said, “Actually, Judah, you’re the father.”

It’s hard to actually accumulate all the wrong in that story – betrayal, incest, destitution imposed by an abusive father-in-law, prostitution, immorality. Tamar is in the line of Jesus. If we say, “It’s too bad a mess,” Jesus says, “I came from the mess. I can deal with it.” As you think of Tamar, I must tell you one of the awful things I did as a young pastor. I actually did a Christmas message on Tamar! When you’re young and dumb – you know! I really was young and dumb. The next week one of my elders met me at the door. His oldest daughter had not lived with him for years. She was estranged from the family, estranged from the church, but she had come for the Christmas service so she heard the Tamar message. He said, “I want to show you something.” His daughter was an artist, and he showed me a pencil drawing, a drawing that she had drawn of Tamar. And in ways that I can hardly express to you, the line drawing depicted someone hurt, abused, shamed, but in the eyes was hope. She had heard Tamar’s hope. “Is the mess too bad?” Jesus said, “I’m from the mess.”

Of course, the mess gets worse. Verse 5, in the line was “Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab.” Oh, you remember who she was, don’t you? The harlot of Jericho who betrayed her people to protect the spies who were ferreting out whether the Promised Land could be inhabited by the people of Israel. And somehow after the walls had come tumbling down and the dust kind of still in the air, somebody said to the prostitute named Rahab, “I want to marry you.” And out of that mess came Jesus.

You read after Rahab, “And Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth.” Who was Ruth? She wasn’t even a Jew; a Moabitess. When Israel came out of Egypt and going to the Promised Land, they had to go along an area where it was so desert that people would die in the desert and they wanted to go the quickest way through Moab, but the people of Moab would not let Israel through. So people died in the desert and Moab became a perpetual enemy of Israel. And now here’s somebody who has married into the Jewish family, they’re not supposed to marry somebody outside of the covenant, but you remember what she said to Naomi – “Your God will be my God.” But when her husband dies, she marries Boaz. What’s the problem there? Boaz is the great, great, great, great, great, great, great, grandson of Tamar. He’s the product of that incestuous relationship. What’s the problem? If you were the product of an incestuous relationship, you could not go to the temple of God. You could not be in the temple. You could not be considered part of the covenant people for ten generations from the incest. Guess how many generations away from the incest is Boaz. Ten generations. And Ruth marries a man out of an incestuous relationship, though she was a Moabitess, an enemy of the people of God, and we wonder if the mess is too bad. Can Jesus deal with it? He says, “I’m out of the mess.”

Verse 6, “And Jesse the father of David the king. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah.” You remember that story, don’t you? Whether she was David’s plaything or a seductress, the account is not clear. What we do know, it was an adulterous relationship. The very one to whom the promise was given, sleeps with a woman not his wife and steals another man’s wife. And then lest he be found out, what did he do to that man? He murdered him. Can Jesus deal with the mess? He says, “I came from the mess.”

Why do we need to know that? When our families are falling apart, when our marriages are falling apart, when we feel there is shame so great we can hardly come to a church, look other people in the eye, somehow echoing from the past needs to be sung in different words – “Ain’t no mountain high enough, ain’t no valley deep enough, ain’t no mess awful enough, ain’t no shame great enough to keep Jesus from loving you.” He came out of a mess because He knows the mess and He can deal with it.

I hope you are praying about Roe vs. Wade being overturned. It’s such an important time for the churches of this nation to be gathered together in prayer. But regardless of where you are in that sin, the mess is not greater than the

grace of God. In my church, David was kind to mention, in Grace, in Peoria, a church very similar to yours in size and scope, history, one of the daughters of our church was the leader of our sanctity of life committee. She wanted to be because she had aborted her first child. And when the shame of that overwhelmed her, she married a man too young and when his pornography problems destroyed their marriage and her own family rejected her because of all of her sin, the Lord wonderfully reclaimed her and reclaimed her marriage and reclaimed his moral health and gave her a conviction for life and the grace of God toward those who have done the worst of things. And she was the bright shining light of the grace of God for so many in our church. "Ain't no mountain high enough, no valley deep enough, no mess too awful, no shame too great to keep Jesus from loving you," because we are made His by our faith in Him not our faith in us.

And if you can't see that in the moms, you sure see it in the dads. Who are they? Judah, verse 3, "the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar." You already know his story. You want more than I just told you. Not only did he sleep with a prostitute who happened to be his daughter-in-law, he was the one who came up with the masterplan of selling Joseph into Egypt. His betrayals are so off, and yet he's the very one that God says, "The scepter, the rule of God, the covenant-keeping gracious God shall not depart from Judah." Listen, if He can keep claiming Judah, He can claim someone like me and you. I mean, if you and I say, "Wait, he sold his brother into slavery, he raises bad kids, he sleeps with his daughter-in-law, then when he finds out who she is he wants to burn her until his own shame stops him, you would just say, 'Unqualified! Unqualified for the lineage of Jesus!'" But he's not the only one.

You recognize of course what I've already said. His lineage goes on to verse 5 – Boaz who was the son of the prostitute, Rahab. And "Boaz became the father of Obed by Ruth." And you recognize, "Wait, this is illegitimate-type child? At least he comes from a bad family background and he marries a pagan who is an enemy of the people of God – unqualified!" That's not the worst.

We could go all the way back to Abraham. Now I do recognize Abraham was a great man of faith. I mean he did go to the land he did not know to obey the call of God, and on that journey he only gave away his wife twice to other men. And then because he did not have patience for the Lord's promise, he slept with his wife's maid and then of all things when his wife got upset about that, what did he do? He took his biological son and the woman with whom he had slept and he put them in the desert to die of exposure. He planned the murder of his own. Unqualified!

And David. Twice in verse 6. Adulterer, murderer, father of bad children, and at the end of his life, despite all the blessings and the goodness of God, numbered his troops as though he were responsible for the glory of his kingdom rather than the God who had so graciously provided it. What would you say? Unqualified! Or

would you say, “Worthy, worthy of glory and honor and power and blessing and glory is a God who would be gracious enough to cover the sin of men like this”? You don’t need the lineage of Jesus on the days you are perfectly qualified in your mind. But when your family is coming undone, when you have been found out, when you wonder if you can get up off the floor because you are so ashamed or sad at what has happened to you and family, Jesus said, “I can deal with it. I can show you by the ones who bore My son.”

The Purpose of Jesus

After all, who is this one who comes? You know the account. Verse 18, “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.” There’s the name again, Jesus Christ. It’s in our songs but we sometimes lose the significance. His name is Jesus, which is just the Old Testament name, Joshua. It means “deliverer.” He’s going to deliver His people. It’s actually the explanation that comes in verse 21 where we are told this one, Mary, will bear a son “and you shall call his name, Jesus.” Why? “He will save his people from their sins.” That’s what He comes to do. It’s His background. It’s what He planned to do from the beginning. It was the promise of His superhero power. He would save His people from their sin. That was the plan all along.

How is He going to do that? Well it’s actually a quite exceptional plan. Verse 11 I went past, but you have to just recognize the wisdom and the glory of God. In that lineage is “Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon. And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel,” and so forth. Jechoniah? Why does he get two mentions in the lineage of Jesus? I mean Jechoniah is not the most common name for us in Biblical circles and there’s a good reason! Do you know why? Because Jechoniah was the last king when Israel had any property left in the promised land; when there was just a sliver left, Jechoniah was the final king. But despite his desperation, he would not turn to God before the deportation, before Israel’s final people got taken into slavery in Babylon. So angry did the Lord get at Jechoniah that Jeremiah the prophet said of Jechoniah, “No seed, bloodline of yours, will bear the Messiah!” Now we’ve got a problem, because God has promised to David, “From your line will come the Messiah.” Jechoniah is in that line, but God says to Jechoniah, “No blood kin of yours is going to be the Messiah.” Now we’ve got a problem here folks. How in the world are we going to have somebody who is legally related to David but is not going to be of the bloodline of Jechoniah? I mean, you’d practically have to have a virgin have a baby and be married to somebody who is of the royal line of David.

Verse 23, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us).” How’s God going to do all this? He’s going to come and be with us, into the mess, into the darkness; here He comes. It’s really the story of the whole Bible. The Creator God, who could

create the stars, flings them forth. That same Creator God is in a manger in Bethlehem. He comes near. He comes close. From walking in the garden at Eden, to when there was that shekinah glory, pillar of fire by night and cloud by day, as He comes close to His people. And then into the temple and actually in the person of Jesus comes to be among His people and then after He has died for our sins He will rise to heaven, but His Spirit will actually indwell us. So close will He become, He actually becomes in us, united to us. It's the Immanuel story from the beginning, that when God knows the worst about us, He knows how awful is our mess, He knows when we are unqualified, that He just keeps coming closer and closer and closer and closer because He is Immanuel, God with us. And it's ultimately the great rescue plan for those of us in the mess.

My wife and I have friends who have been missionaries to Africa for many years. On their last stay, they adopted a child from the streets. They wanted the grace of God to touch some despite the mess. He was still a mess. One day they discovered that a family heirloom, a pen, was missing from a bureau in the parent's bedroom. And they asked the young man, "Did you steal the pen?" "Oh, no." Which didn't explain why it was in his pocket. When he was discovered, he knew from the streets what was going to happen – he would get a beating. And so he ran and he went and he hid in the darkness under his bed. His new mother went into the bedroom and she crawled under the bed with him into the darkness and in that darkness, so that she would be sure he understood and she understood, she held his face in her hands and she put her face right next to his and she said, "You listen to me, nothing you did got you into this family, and nothing you do will get you out of this family."

His name is Jesus. He is the Deliverer. And He came to be with us, into the darkness and into the mess, so that you and I, by faith alone in His grace alone, will know the blessings of God forever. Praise God. He is big enough to deal with the mess, even messes like you and me.

Father, I thank You for Your Word, for the glories of the Gospel that are ours, that we require, not because we qualify but because our Savior did, not because we are worthy, but because He is, not because we have cleaned up the mess but because He came from the mess and knows how to embrace us in it. Would You teach us again, Father, what it means to be able to claim, "There's nothing in me. I've got nothing, but I'm with Him – the One who died for me and claims me by His grace alone. I am with Him." Father, may that claim be ours, that the joys and the glories of this season might be real in our hearts. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

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