



## JESUS' FAMILY TREE

Matthew 1:1-17

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When my son, Matthew, was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade he gave the announcements over the PA system. A teacher in the school, who was a Presbyterian but did not teach Matt or even know him, exclaimed – “that sounds just like Tom Evans!” Apparently, Matthew has suffered the fate of many sons who wind up sounding and looking like their fathers. In fact, no less than a dozen times since he has returned from college this fall, people have exclaimed, “You’re looking more like your father, every day.” But perhaps, it’s our voices and cadence that are similar. I have a great uncle whom I never met that was a radio announcer in Minneapolis. My aunt says I sound just like him. It is an intriguing thought that you look and sound like a person you have never met...that isn’t even a direct blood ancestor.

As I was preparing this sermon, looking at the lectionary text, Matthew 1:18-25, I found myself being pulled to the beginning of the chapter – that long list of Jesus’ ancestors – and a thought crept into my brain: *If Jesus was fully human, does that mean, like us, that he was shaped by his parents? And not only his parents, but his ancestors as well?*

As I contemplated that long genealogy taking up precious, sacred-word space in the Bible, I decided the answer is decidedly, yes. The primary reason, or so it is thought, that we find this list in scripture is to prove that Jesus has the right pedigree to be the Messiah. Certainly, it is a key reason. But if that were the only reason, we would not need all the outliers. There are many names that would not have been found in a normal genealogy. We have several women such as Tamar and Ruth who demonstrated boldness, courage, and vision in moving the lineage forward another generation and we have one woman, Bathsheba, referred to as the “wife of Uriah”. These names would have been inexplicable if this list were only meant to serve to

connect Jesus to the prophecies, for the tradition was to list only males.

This morning, as we move closer to the manger, we will spend some time exploring Jesus’ lineage, because what else are the holidays for except to tell stories of the family tree. This will enable us to better understand how Jesus’ human self shaped his divine calling.

I imagine Jesus was one of those children whom you cannot get their attention because they always have their noses buried in a book. He knew the Bible that well.

We might be tempted to think that he knew Scripture and had power to heal because he was divine. But the text goes out of its way to avoid such conclusions, most decidedly by the stories we don’t find in the Bible.

There are dozens of ancient books, known as infancy Gospels, some that date back to the second century, that tell fantastic legends of Jesus’ infancy. In one, known as the *Gospel of Pseudo Matthew*, the infant Jesus tames dragons on the way to Egypt, Palm trees bow before him, and he tells Mary and Joseph, “Do not be afraid, and do not consider me to be a little child; for I am and always have been perfect; and all the beasts of the forest must needs be tame before me.”

There are hundreds of examples in these narratives of the child and even the infant Jesus showing profound, creepy power and speaking with an adult tongue. None of these stories became a part of scripture. They were all considered apocryphal, inaccurate, untrue. The only story we have of Jesus as a child is a perfectly human one – in which he runs away from his parents and gets in trouble for it. Scripture is clear that Jesus was fully human.

The genealogy is far too long to explore in depth this morning, so we will focus on the stories of several key kings. I believe we can see the thread of how these kingly ancestors shaped his life.

Jesus was to be the King, the one anointed by God to save Israel. To prepare to become that king, even one without a throne, he would have studied the kings thoroughly. Although he never became ruler of the land, he inherited many of their qualities. They now help us better to understand the nature of this child coming to be born in Bethlehem, whom we know will be the newborn King!

Jehoshaphat (which means “Yahweh has judged”) reigned from 870-848BC. While many kings led the people away from God, erecting idols and totems throughout the land, Jehoshaphat demolished the land of idols and restored central worship to the Temple. We see that Jesus had the same zeal for purifying the Temple when he turned over the tables of the money changers. Perhaps it was Jehoshaphat that inspired him.

Jehoshaphat always looked to God in critical decisions and, at one fearsome moment the Ammonites were threatening the land, the people went into the temple to pray. Jesus relied on prayer, constantly turning to God for strength and guidance, whether it was after a long day’s work or preparing to face his greatest challenge to climb that cross.

When the people went out to confront the Ammonites, not all of them carried swords. Some cantors were singing so loudly it led the enemy to flee. Imagine that – defeating military might with praise to God. Jesus learned the power to bring peace through praise from Jehoshaphat’s example.

Jesus kept God continually before him, attributing his success to his heavenly father not his own power.

This would be critical for Jesus, because he would have learned not only from the success of his ancestors but their failures as well.

Teaching the family stories, according to at least one respected author, is THE MOST IMPORTANT thing for parents to do. And not only the good stories, but the ones that tested the family and, despite the trial, the family persevered and moved through failure.

We know certain vulnerabilities are passed down from generation to generation, such as addiction and abuse. And indeed, abuse and corruption were part of Jesus’ heritage; we find it embedded in his genealogy.

King Manasseh, listed in Jesus’ genealogy, engaged in the most heinous of crimes – child sacrifice. However, we see in Jesus’ life that he had an acute passion for children, much more than was common in his day. He fiercely protected them saying, “It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble.” Perhaps, reading about King Manasseh awoke this passion.

But the most important example would have been that of King David. Our text contains that rather odd phrase in verse six, “And David was the father of Solomon *by the wife of Uriah*.” I can only think of one reason to put this information in the genealogy. To tell those hard truths of Jesus’ heritage. Perhaps you recall the story. David was in love with Bathsheba. He murdered her husband Uriah by withdrawing troops during a battle, leaving him alone to fight the enemy. Solomon was their child.

I believe the failures of many kings explains his deep humility. Not wanting to become them, he assiduously avoids political power. He would have seen in the hubris of kings, the corrupting power of failing to give all the glory to God.

After the feeding the 5,000 people were so impressed by his display of power we are told,

*When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*

Jesus ran away! He didn't want to deal with that challenge. In Hebrews we are told, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin." Yes, Jesus was tempted. Even, at one point, denying his family tree.

Perhaps this explains his stunning statement to a crowd in Mark 3:33. While preaching, someone tells him his mother and brothers are outside asking for him. He says,

*"Who are my mother and my brothers?"  
And looking at those who sat around him,  
he said, "Here are my mother and my  
brothers!"*

This might be the most comforting aspect of the humanity of Jesus and his family tree. He struggled with his family roots, as do we all. Many people run from their past, fearing they will become the worst of their heritage. Perhaps you fear you will become unfaithful like your father; or your addictions will destroy your relationships like an uncle; or you will pass down your mother's obsessive need for perfection to your own children. The list is as long as the ancestors we know.

Jesus understands that fear, he felt it, for there were deep and profound flaws in his ancestors. But he overcame his past by always keeping God first, using prayer when tempted, leaning on scripture, and taking a break from it all when he needed to.

And Jesus did not deny the stories. He did not hide from them. He learned them – the good and the bad. Give yourself permission to do the same.

He found a way to represent the best of his heritage, rather than the worst. Especially from King David.

Jesus would have been wary of David's failings, but even more moved by his unequalled passion for God. David was so in love with God that he would do anything for this love.

My parents taught me a Portuguese saying from their days in Brazil, "*Sein vergonia*". It roughly

translates as "*un-embarrassable*". David had a love for God that was so passionate, it led him to dance before the Ark of the Lord with all his might. People were aghast, not only that he was dancing in this manner, but that he did so in his underwear. But when you're in love, it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. Jesus had that same zealous love for God.

Be comforted this Christmas. Our Lord understands the challenge and blessing of family – all of it. Spend more time embracing your heritage, tell the stories, all the stories. Seek God's face at all times and, like our Lord, perhaps you too can represent the best of your family tree.

Amen.