

There's Room for Every Story – Matthew 1:1-17

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November 27, 2022

There is a group of talented pastors, artists, and designers called Sanctified Art. They create worship content for churches through different seasons of the church's liturgical year. This year, they have created a series for Advent called "From Generation to Generation." We will be using their themes, as well as some of their liturgy and music as the framework for these four Sundays in Advent and for Christmas.

Here's some background on the series from the Sanctified Art Creative Team:

As we read through and studied the scriptures we selected, a line from Mary's song of protest and praise gave us pause: Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. (Luke 1: 48b-50)

Despite the challenges and vulnerability she faced, Mary could glimpse the scale and scope of the good news she was part of bringing forth. This good news transcends time and space—it was and is bigger than just her. Christ is coming for collective liberation: God's redemption is at work for years to come. Therefore, the promise is meant to be lived out and passed on from generation to generation.

We are invited to look at the characters in our scriptures and wonder: What did each character pass on or contribute? How did each character participate in God's liberation and love? Which characters try to thwart God's justice and what can we learn from them? What is our role now? What is our generation's task? What will we carry forth, and what should we leave behind?

The root word of "generation" is "gen" meaning "origin" or "birth." Our theme is also a call to action: what are we being called to generate or bring forth? What have your ancestors and those who have come before you passed on for you to continue? Who are the spiritual elders in your community who planted the seeds for the things that are now blooming? What seeds are you planting for the future?

From Generation to Generation... reminds us of the ways our lives, histories, actions, and stories are interconnected and woven together. In the midst

of narratives, policies, and rhetoric designed to divide us, what does it look like to practice belonging to one another? The work of God is always unfolding — in and through us. This Advent season, how will we carry it forth?

So, over the course of the next five or six weeks, we will take up this call to ponder how the story of Christ coming as Messiah is a story for every generation and for everybody within each generation.

Today, as we begin this series *Generation to Generation*, it's appropriate that we read and embrace the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1. It chronicles the connection of 42 generations—from Abraham to Jesus. "In this long list of names, we remember the trauma and triumph of those who came before; each name holds a story, and their story gives way to Christ's story. God works through the unexpected people and stories of the past and present. When we zoom in, we may not be able to see how each character propels the story forward, but when we zoom out, we can see how each story is woven together into a larger tapestry."

It's interesting that the genealogy presented here is not tidy. Scholars have questioned the incompleteness of the genealogy. Some periods have appeared to be left out. In some ways, the record of Jesus' family tree is like a tapestry of mismatched strings woven together. The untidiness of the lineage emphasizes how God grafts family in different and unexpected ways.

That's hopeful, isn't it? It allows room for stories of blended families, families through adoption, or families who don't know their ancestry. And it allows for others the culture has tended to marginalize to also be included in God's plan of salvation and liberation.

In this very long list of descendants, let's consider the stories of a few.

We know of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and Solomon. They are famous for their callings to serve. They also had their own share of doubts and waywardness when it came to following God's call on their lives. They made mistakes and actively in some cases worked to go against the will of God. Yet, of course, Matthew doesn't leave them out of the lineage. They're valuable pieces of the family.

Consider also these lesser-known characters amid the sea of familiar names in Matthew 1:

If you read through these names, for example, you're going to find certain women called out. The Jews traced their lineage through the fathers, but in Matthew's genealogy, he recognizes some of the mothers. So we'll see, "Perez, whose mother was Tamar," and "Boaz, whose mother was Rahab."

And in addition, most of these mothers represent things that the Jews *wouldn't* expect in the introduction of a Messianic King.

- Tamar was Perez' mother ... but also his *sister-in-law*. (A twisted story you can read all about in Genesis 38.)
- Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute, someone who, under the Law of Moses, shouldn't *exist* in the Jewish community.
- Ruth was a Moabite, a people group who wasn't allowed to worship at the Jewish temple.
- Bathsheba isn't even mentioned by name. Instead, we get "Uriah's wife." David murdered the Uriah the Hittite, one of his famous mighty men, and took Bathsheba for himself.

If you're Matthew, that's not the most flattering sort of information that you want to be bringing into people's mind when they're reading the genealogy of a king.

So what does that tell us about the story that Matthew is eager to share? Well, in the rest of Matthew's gospel, we're going to find that Jesus subverts the Jews' expectations when it comes to their Messiah. He's going to challenge the way they think about the Sabbath, giving, obedience, and the kingdom of heaven itself. The Jews expected a Messiah who would liberate Israel and *rule* the other nations. And yet Matthew introduces Jesus by highlighting how his bloodline *includes* other nations.

And it includes the famous and flawed men called by God, but also women and the prominent positions they hold in the story of God's plan. Matthew names the exploited, the forgotten, and the powerless. For them as much as anyone, he has come to include and to save.

And then there are the random names of the others on this list who we haven't heard of before and are never spoken of anywhere throughout the Biblical text. They are the anonymous ones: the Jeconiahs, the Azors,

the Zadoks, the Akims. We know nothing about them, and yet they are included in this most famous of lineages.

Their stories matter, too. There's a place for them. Despite their anonymity, their names are woven in with the famous and even with the marginalized in the community. Together, they form the complicated and beautiful ancestry from which the Savior of the world would come.

Over the last couple of weeks, there's, regrettably, been another series of mass murders across the country that have traumatized several communities. From the University of Virginia, to the University of Idaho, to Colorado Springs, Colorado, to Chesapeake, Virginia, college campuses, a nightclub, and a Walmart have been the scenes of senseless bloodshed. The killings have destroyed lives and forever altered the lives of others.

At the University of Virginia, one of the student athletes killed was Devin Chandler, who, according to a teammate, energized those around him. He drew others toward him, said his high school coach. "He was going to be a leader in whatever he chose to do, in whatever field he chose to work in. Unfortunately, the world lost a good one."

At the University of Idaho, one of the four students murdered there, Xana Kernodle, "didn't really worry about the drama and stuff that much," according to her father. "She was never into that. She just liked having fun. Never about materialistic things. She was--all the time--always with her friends."

In Colorado Springs, Derrick Rump was a bartender at Club Q who had "found a community of people that he loved very much, and he felt that he could shine there – and he did," said his sister. "He made a difference in so many people's lives, and that's where he wanted to be."

And in Chesapeake, Virginia, several employees of a Walmart store were in the break room when one of their colleagues, an overnight team leader, entered the room and began shooting. Several were killed and several more injured.

In each of these instances, and in each victim of the very long list of victims of so many other mass shootings in this country, they are not forgotten. Their stories mattered to the people who loved them. And their stories mattered to the God who made them. Some of them were more

well-known by others. Some maybe weren't known except by those in their families and small circles of friends. Yet, to God, they were all the same.

And from generation to generation, in that long genealogy that makes up the human race, not one person has been lost to God. Their stories mattered; their lives mattered.

And so do the lives of every living human today. Every story matters. Whether it's the celebrity or the homeless guy under the bridge, in the lineage of God's people, in the complicated tapestry that is our human ancestry, there's not a one of us whose story is free of relevance.

As Advent begins, so many in the world ache for their place. Millions of people, including some you and I know, long to be reminded that there is room for their stories, too. And although they may not articulate it this way, there are so many who long to know that a Savior has come for them.

Our job is to know him and to make him known.