

“Trouble in the Family Tree”

Matthew 1:1-17

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

ARISE: September 13, 2015

Some years ago, a member of Woodside was asked to read the Scripture passage in worship. To protect her identity I will call her Cindy Steward. Before the service, Cindy came up to me and complained that I always give her the most difficult passages to read with lots of complicated Hebrew names. I reassured her and said, “Well this one is easy, Cindy. It’s Matthew, chapter 5 starting with verse 1.” Matthew 5 is the Beatitudes of Jesus. But when she stood before the congregation and announced the passage, she didn’t say, “Our Scripture reading is Matthew 5:1 –the Beatitudes of Jesus.” She said, “Our Scripture reading is Matthew 1:5 – the Genealogy of Jesus” – a list of nearly 50 hard to pronounce names. I think in her head she was cursing my name. She thought of a creative solution: “Let’s all say the names together.” Now everyone wanted to take my name in vain. So I jumped in and told her the correct passage.

In honor of ARISE and our fall kick off of the New Testament part of The Story, I will attempt the impossible. Right before your very eyes and ears, I will preach on the genealogy in Matthew chapter 1 - one of the most boring passages in the Bible, the section that everyone skips over when they begin reading the New Testament. Forty-seven names. Forty-two generations. And taking a cue from my dear friend Cindy Steward, I ask for your help. You don’t have to read the names. Just help me with a little audience participation.

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham:

First there was Abraham the friend of God (Yeah!)

Who was the father of Isaac, (Yeah!)

The father of Jacob, also known as Israel (Yeah!)

Who became the father of Judah and eleven other patriarchs (Yeah!),

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, (Who?)

Their mother was Tamar, Judah’s daughter-in-law, (Uh Oh)

After Perez came Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon, and Salmon, (Huh?)

Salmon married Rahab, (Wasn’t She a Bad Girl?)

Yes, but she helped the Israelites conquer Jericho (You Go Girl!)

Their son was Boaz, (Boaz?)

You remember Boaz married Ruth, (Oh Right!)

Their son was Obed the father of Jesse who was the father of King David (Applause!).

But David had an affair with Bathsheba the wife of Uriah (Oh No!)

Yet later they had wise King Solomon, (Applause!)

But Solomon’s son Rehoboam caused a civil war which split the nation in two, (Boo!)

His son Abijah was evil, (Boo!)

But then came Asa who was good, (Yeah!)

Followed by good king Jehoshaphat who was known for his jumping, (Boing!)

After him was Jehoram, (Boo!)

Uzziah, (Yeah!)

Jotham, (Yeah!)

Ahaz, (Boo!)

Hezekiah, (Yeah!)

And Manasseh who worshiped idols, practiced sorcery & sacrificed his own child,
(Double Boo!)
Things did not get any better under Amon, (Boo!)
Until his son Josiah cleaned up the Temple and restored God's Law (Applause)
But he died prematurely in battle (Bummer)
And was followed by Jeconiah and his brothers who were all evil (Boo!),
Eventually the Babylonians came and destroyed Jerusalem, burned down the Temple and
took the people away into Exile (Ugh!)
Yet David's line continued. There was Shealtiel (Who?)
Zerubbabel (Huh?)
And Eliakim, Azor, Zadok, Akim, Eliud, Eleazar, Matthan and Jacob (Oy Vey!)
Finally there is Joseph, the husband of Mary, who gave birth to Jesus, who is called
Christ. (Applause!)

You may wonder, "Why did Matthew start off his book with a boring list like this?" It would never be a best seller today. Yet after listing Jesus' ancestors, Matthew summarizes with this amazing conclusion:

Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ (Matthew 1:17).

All those ancestors fit into God's perfect plan. Every fourteen generations there was a crucial turning point: the glorious zenith of David's reign and the shameful depths of the Babylonian captivity. Many of those ancestors were clueless about God's plan. But some understood they were playing a part in God's Story. When Matthew put it all down on paper and stepped back he could see the pattern of God's plan which the others missed. All those names, all those stories don't make sense until you step back and see the whole picture. Randy Frazee says the same: "The Bible is not a hundred ancient unrelated paintings but a mural all knitted together to tell the story of God's great love for us and the extent to which he will go to get us back."

This is the one continuing message throughout The Story: God will go to any length to get us back. He wants a relationship with me and with you. God wants to bless you – bless you with a life filled with His love, a life that starts now and continues on into eternity. That's the mission He gave Abraham and Sarah: to go out and bless the world.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Genesis 12:1-3)

From Abraham and Sarah, God brought forth a family - the Israelites – and gave them the same mission: to bless the world. He chose the people of Israel to spread the news, to share the story of God's love for the world and how He wants us back. God wants you in his family tree, the family tree of Abraham, David and Jesus.

One lesson Matthew's Genealogy teaches us is **Human History Cannot Stop God's Story**. In your bulletin you will find a Bible Timeline from David to Jesus. If you recall your reading of the Old Testament you'll remember it was rough for God's people. Every time you see the name of an Empire in bold that means some foreign dictator was

in charge of the Holy Land and enslaving God's people. From the time of David to the Empire of Assyria the Israelites had 268 years of freedom – just a little bit longer than the USA has been a nation. After that the Assyrians took the 10 northern tribes into exile never to return. Then the Babylonians took Judah into exile. The Persians let them go home but the Persians were still in charge.

Between the Testaments Alexander the Great and the Greeks replaced the Persians. For a brief period – 100 years – the Promised Land was ruled by Jews under the Maccabees. This is the time when the feast of Hanukkah occurred. Yet this freedom ended when the Maccabee family fought each other. Each side invited the Roman Empire to come in. They did...and never left. The Romans placed the fearful Herod the Great on the throne – the one who killed his own wives and sons and tried to destroy Jesus.

As you can see there were many times when human history tried to wipe out God's people, disrupt God's plan, stop God's Story. Yet Matthew's list of names shows the Story survived. In fact it thrived. There is a lot of talk these days about the decline of Christianity and the closing of churches in Europe and America. In the last three hundred years there were numerous philosophers and politicians who predicted the demise of Christianity. Yet they have come and gone and God's Story continues on. If you don't believe me, just try to drive into Center City when the Pope shows up.

Nothing in history can stop God's Story. In fact, the Good News is spreading faster in the places where it faces hardship and persecution. The only things that slow it down are apathy and abundance. Why? We start worshiping temporary stuff instead of the eternal God. Trust in God's Story. The prophet Isaiah said,

All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever. (Isaiah 40:6, 8)

Matthew's Genealogy also teaches us **Your History Cannot Stop God's Story**. In each of our pasts there is something or someone we would rather forget. In the movie *Hitch*, Will Smith is trying to impress Eva Mendes. For their first date he arranges a private tour of Ellis Island so she can see her great great grandfather's signature in the book. She begins to weep. Hitch begins to smile. Then she starts to shout and leaves the room. Turns out her ancestor was the Butcher of Cadiz. That's not his job. It's what they called him on the "Wanted" posters. She says, "It's just one of those horrible family legacies we've all tried to forget."

Maybe you don't have a mass murderer in your background. Yet family trees are complicated. Looking back at the past can be painful. I took a seminary course in marriage and family counseling. One counseling tool we learned was drawing a genogram. It looks like a simple family tree. But then we were instructed to write in various family crises: divorce, addictions, abuse, mental illness, a tragic death, adultery, etc... The point is to identify patterns passed on from one generation to the next. Some students shared their genograms with the class. It was a powerful and emotional moment for them. For the first time, they confronted the reality of their past. We all want the perfect family. But often, behind each of us, there is a troubled family tree.

The instant Jesus was born He inherited a past with problems. There were some evil kings. Even the great Old Testament saints: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, David and Solomon were prideful, lustful, cowardly, deceptive, jealous and vengeful. Matthew includes five women in the list. Tamar seduces her father-in-law Judah and turns out

more righteous than him (Genesis 38). Rahab is a lady of the evening (Joshua 2). Ruth is a foreigner, an outsider, who becomes the great grandmother of David (Ruth 1-4). Bathsheba has an affair with David and David arranges for her husband's death (II Samuel 11-12). And finally there is Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Matthew's point? Even if you have a dysfunctional history it doesn't disqualify you from being in God's family tree. Abuse, adultery, addiction, brokenness and pain in your past may be controlling you today. Perhaps they shaped and molded your identity and feelings of self-worth. It doesn't matter. God wants you in His family tree. Your History can't stop God's Story. Only you can stop God Story from including you.

Today I invite you to **Let His Story be Your Story**. Let God include you in His Story. In fact, let God write His Story on your heart. Ever wonder why there is an Old Testament and a New Testament? This isn't a Microsoft upgrade. It isn't Bible 2.0. The word "Testament" means "Covenant." A covenant is a relationship between two or more people. Yesterday I celebrated a wedding. They wrote their own vows. The bride promised not to love the groom even when he leaves the kitchen a mess. That's a covenant. A relationship. At first, God had one type of Testament or Covenant with His people. It was based on the Law written on stone tablets. As we all know from our reading of the Old Testament, the Israelites – like us – were sinners. They broke those stone tablets multiple times. We all break the Covenant.

God knows this. He isn't surprised. He planned all along to give us a New Relationship, a New Covenant, a New Testament. Christians didn't come up with the idea of a New Covenant. It's mentioned in the Old Testament by the prophet Jeremiah:

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

The Old Covenant was on the outside. The New Covenant will be on the inside. The Old Covenant was carved into stone. The New Covenant is engraved in our hearts. The Old Covenant required prophets, priests, and kings to tell you to do it. The New Covenant moves you from within by the power of the Spirit. Most importantly, the Old Covenant came to us through a human: Moses. The New Covenant came to us directly from God who became a human in Jesus. God came in person to get this job done. I invite you to join a Growth Group, attend worship and read the Story this fall. God made the trip from heaven to earth just so He could write you into His Story, just so He could write you a new eternal story, just so He could have you in His family tree.

My Dad recently sent me a family treasure. It doesn't look very valuable. It's a little black box. The treasure is inside. It contains pictures from my parents' childhood, their wedding and my childhood. Buried within the files is an amazing gift: my great grandfather Karl's journal of his trip from Sweden to America in 1890. I am reading it,

studying it, reliving it. I treasure it as much as the story I earlier received of my mother's grandfather Haig who, as a 14 year old boy, fled persecution and arrived in Ellis Island alone in 1896. I love these – not only because they tell the story of adventurous men who made incredible journeys at great personal risk – but also because when I read their stories I start to understand more about my story – where I came from, why I am here, who I am.

In the New Testament, we will read the most amazing journey of all. God didn't just cross an ocean, He crossed the space between heaven and earth and the chasm of our sin. He descended not to Ellis Island but to a rough manger, a splintered cross and an empty tomb. Read this Story. Study it. Devour it. Inside this treasure you will find your Story. You'll find not only your past. You'll find your family and your future.