

Sermon: Genealogies of Grace
Gus Jordan
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Between now and Advent, most of the Gospel lessons we will read come from the Gospel of Matthew. Today's lesson includes important verses from Ch. 10 encouraging us to be open to God's spirit in our midst, and to engage in service to others.

But if we are going to immerse ourselves in Matthew from now until Advent, I want to back up and rehearse for a minute how Matthew actually begins his Gospel, as a way to set the context. Beginning in Chapter 1, vs. 1, he writes:

“An account of the genealogy [or birth] of Jesus the Messiah, 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 Aram ...”

Let me pause: we are through three verses, with only 15 more like this to go.

Skipping to verse 5 we hear that “Salmon was the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth (remember Ruth: she later gets a whole book to herself), and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah” (which by the way is a whole sordid story of its own), and skipping to verse 11 we find “Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.”

And after the deportation to Babylon, more fathers and sons until verse 15 where “Eliud is the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ.”

Verse 17 reads: “So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.” And with all of that as introduction, Matthew finally writes in verse 18: “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.”

And with that, Matthew begins to tell the story of Jesus.

I don't know about you, but seventeen verses of genealogy is probably not the way I would begin the most important story in the history of the world. In fact, we typically skip over these kinds of lists because they are boring, we don't know who most of these people are, the names are impossible to pronounce, and we don't get the point of it. And yet, this is how Matthew begins his Gospel, and, as it turns out, he actually has a really good reason to do so.

With this extensive genealogy beginning with Abraham and Sarah, Matthew wants us to understand at the outset that Jesus, and thus you and me through Jesus, are part of a long, rich, incredible story of God's movement through human history that did not begin with us and does not and will not stop with us. Each of these names stand for incredible stories of courage and faithfulness mixed with duplicity, subterfuge, and drama that exceeds any steamy series you can see on HBO or Showtime.

In these verses Matthew wants us to remember that God moves through the stories of real people who are at heart not unlike us. And no matter what crazy and morally suspect things they do, we are much like them. Only understanding that fact, that we too are complicated, that we too can be courageous, but that we too are often morally suspect ourselves, and always at risk for the tragedies and defeats life brings - only understanding that - can we appreciate the radical importance of the story of Jesus that Matthew tells.

For that reason this morning I want to begin where Matthew begins, and where our lectionary readings from the book of Genesis also focus today, and that is with Abraham and Sarah.

Over the last two weeks we have heard two very disturbing stories about this biblical family. From one perspective our biblical text and traditions hold this couple up as models of faith. But the stories we read over the last two weeks do not suggest that they are models of moral and ethical behavior. In fact, they are a mess, morally, relationally, in almost every way.

Let me refresh your memory.

Last week we were reminded that God has promised Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation, and yet despite God's ongoing promises, Sarah, in her old age, has no child, and thus Abraham has no suitable heir. Sarah cannot seem to conceive a child but she does conceive a plan, one which she soon regrets. It involves Hagar, the young, attractive, Egyptian servant of Sarah. Warning: this gets a bit racy.

In Genesis chapter 16 Sarah offers Hagar to her husband hoping that Hagar will conceive a child with him and that the family lineage will be preserved. Abraham gladly obliges, and Hagar quickly becomes pregnant. But Hagar has her own ideas about how to play the situation, and begins to hold her own obvious fertility over against old, barren Sarah, and the complications of this unusual family arraignment begin to play out in challenging ways.

Sarah responds by complaining to Abraham about Hagar and he says, basically, do what you want with her, she's your slave and this was your idea to begin with. Sarah proceeds to treat Hagar harshly, perhaps even abusively, so much so that Hagar runs away seeking protection. When no other viable options present themselves, pregnant Hagar eventually returns.

Matters, however, only deteriorate. Hagar, as Sarah wished, gives birth to a potential heir, and names him Ishmael. The birth of this child, though it provides the lineage both Abraham and Sarah longed for, does not make Sarah any happier. In fact, this is not a time of rejoicing in the Abraham household.

Time passes, years go by, and then, unexpectedly, thirteen years later, Sarah herself conceives, and most of you are aware of that story. The conception of Isaac is a time for true rejoicing for Sarah and Abraham. With Yahweh's promise of Isaac, laughter finally returns to this tense household, the patriarch and matriarch each get a new name, and Isaac is born. Through Isaac will pass God's promise to Abraham.

But now, what of Ishmael? In Genesis chapter 21 we learn that Ishmael actually appears to get along with little Isaac, they even appear to play together, but this infuriates Sarah. Ishmael has become a threat. In one of the more sour moments of Biblical history Sarah commands Abraham to cast Hagar and Ishmael out of the household and out of the community.

At that time and place, such a banishment amounts to a death sentence. After consulting with Yahweh, Abraham concurs, gives Hagar and Ishmael a little bread and water and sends them out into the dessert. Cast away from their family and friends, Hagar fully expects that they will perish. Abraham fears the same, but reluctantly sends them away. Only Yahweh's intervention saves Hagar and Ishmael from death.

Interestingly, Ishmael later marries an Egyptian, and in one of the more ironic biblical footnotes Ishmael's daughter Mahalath winds up married to Sarah's grandson Esau. Only by living in a small town like ours can you fully appreciate this kind of family intrigue. Perhaps it is a little bit of justice that Sarah, who treated Hagar so poorly, can never fully escape Hagar's influence on her family.

In addition, in Islam, as you perhaps know, Ishmael, who is after all Abraham's child and Isaac's half brother, is considered one of the direct ancestors of Muhammad, the founder of Islam, and thus links Judaism and Islam together through Abraham.

But back to our story. For in spite of Isaac's birth, all is not well for Sarah and Abraham. They have been through a lifetime of good and bad times together, and the trials have taken their toll. The last straw comes, as reflected in today's lesson, when Abraham takes Isaac, Sarah's cherished, longed for, and only son, to the mountain to be sacrificed. You know the outcome. God intervenes at the last moment, spares Isaac, and praises Abraham's faith.

What you may not know is that Abraham does not return from the mountain to Sarah, and as far as we can tell from the Biblical narrative, never sees Sarah alive again. Sarah immediately travels, with out Abraham, to a city called Hebron. Abraham travels to Beersheba. Perhaps, after nearly killing their only son, he cannot bear to face her. Only at Sarah's death does Abraham go to her, to morn and bury his wife. Pain, guilt, grief; the kind of pain people really experience in their lives and families, drips from these passages.

In the details of Abraham's family saga that flow through these chapters and across the generations, people make good choices and bad ones. They face sometimes impossible dilemmas and even incomprehensible divine expectations that make no logical or moral sense to them or to us today.

What is comprehensible and what is true and what is reliable, is that in and through the messy lives of people like Abraham and Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac, God acts. In and through and sometimes despite them, God makes promises and fulfills ancient hopes. The point is that God redeems and loves his people precisely in the drama, complexity, and tragedy of everyday life.

We too will fail, and sometimes we will fail extravagantly, but it is exactly in those places, in the details of our brokenness and disappointments, our uncertainties and blemishes, that God sweeps us into his arms and carries us on. Generation after generation, when we are heroic and when we cower in fear or shame, God moves the promise he made to Abraham forward, through us, in spite of us, for us. All the way to the Gospel of Matthew, who through a long genealogy reminds us that we stand in a remarkable line of flawed and yet faithful people. A line that begins with Abraham and Sarah, and that comes to fulfillment, as Matthew says, with the birth of Jesus who is the Christ.

In the confidence of that story, we step with our ancestors to the table of grace. This morning, when you come to this table to receive communion, remember just two lessons from these stories.

First, as you come forward to receive the gifts of God, remember to acknowledge that you, like Abraham and Sarah and the rest of us, are probably pretty messed up, to put it theologically. We all are pretty messed up. Your story, your actions, your family, is probably burdened with all kinds of drama, disappointment, and failure. Even when our intentions are good, most of us are lucky if we get it half right, and hurt or disappoint only a few people.

Paul reminds us that in the absence of God's righteousness, everything we do, even the good we do, is tainted. The complex stories of our Hebrew ancestors certainly confirm as much.

But second, we are nevertheless called to act in courage for social justice and for the good of our families, friends, and neighbors, and for the good of the world, even if sometimes that action is controversial or risky, inadequate or clumsy. We did that last week in our all-church meeting as we cobbled together a mission statement that welcomes everyone into our ministries. As we heard today, our ancestors were no strangers to messy choices, and yet they acted. So too, we must continually renew our commitment to act in hope for the world.

We are called, finally, to do our best, as best we understand that calling, and in the monuments and ruins of our actions, like those of Abraham and Sarah, to know that God's promises move in us, through us, and around us. For we too, in spite of it all, are loved, forgiven, rescued, and welcomed through God's unconditional genealogy of grace.

Amen.