



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"The Four Questionable Ancestors of Jesus"

A Sermon Series on the Women of Advent

Matthew 1:1-6, 16-17

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This is a picture of my great-grandparents on my mother's side of the family. They are Lovic and Valinda Jane Livingston, the parents of my mother's mother. I wrote my cousin who has done some research into our family tree and I called my 91-year-old aunt who is the last living sibling to my mother to find out about them, and I learned that they had a farm in northern Mississippi. He died when he was 33 and she at the age of 50. A typhoid epidemic swept through northern Mississippi, and Lovic and one of their daughters died in it. Valinda and my grandmother along with her brother Henry had to move in with relatives and rent out their farmland while they themselves essentially worked as hired hands for the relatives. That's all I know. On both sides of my family tree, for a number of reasons we're not able to get very far in tracing our roots.

I've met some people in this church who have quite a legacy here in Texas. Multiple generations of the family have lived in the Lone Star State. How many of you are 3rd generation Texans? How many are 4th generation? Any 5th generation Texans here? Texans whose families have been here a long time take great pride in their heritage.

Studying one's genealogy can be a fascinating experience. We find out where we come from, who our people were, and we trace our roots. But there are times when what we discover in our family background isn't what we thought we'd find. Did you hear about the woman from a blue-blood family in Boston who paid \$5,000 to someone to trace her family tree and then \$10,000 to cover it up?!

The Gospel of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus, and here we see an outline of His family tree. When I was growing up, I remember reading this passage, struggling to pronounce the names, and thinking to myself, "Why in the world is this passage even in the Bible?! It's pretty boring to wade through all these names." However, over the years, I've come to see that there are great biblical truths contained in the lists of names in Scripture, and we would do well to consider the reason God has them in the Bible.

It may seem strange to us that Matthew would choose to begin his gospel with a genealogy, but to a devout Jew it was the most natural, most interesting, and you could even argue the most essential way to begin the story of a person's life. Jews were very concerned with where a person came from and who their daddy was, and for Jesus to be able to trace his lineage all the way back to Abraham, the father of the nation, would be pretty impressive. It would be like tracing your family tree back to George Washington, or someone who sailed on the Mayflower or fought at the Alamo.

If you study the genealogy of Jesus, you'll see that there is actually a structure to the list of names. There are 3 sections which each list 14 names, and the 3 sections represent the 3

great stages of Israel's history. The first 14 generations leads upward from Abraham to King David. The second 14 generations plummets downward from the reign of King Solomon to the Babylonian Exile. Finally, the last 14 generations moves upward again from the Exile to the birth of Jesus Christ. Each of these sections tells us something about God, and when all three are woven together we see a picture of the creative way in which God shaped human history for the advent of His Son.

If you look very closely at the names in the first 14 generations, you'll see they include names we might not expect to find. Four of the ancestors, and only four, are connected with named women. And all four of the women are not the sort of people one would be eager to include in one's family tree. The four women are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. It's rather shocking they are included in the genealogy of Jesus.

Tamar was the woman who pretended she was a prostitute to trick her father-in-law, Judah, into keeping his promise to her (Gen. 38). Rahab, who really was a hooker, is best known for helping the spies of Israel in Joshua 2 when they came to spy on the city of Jericho. Ruth was from Moab, and she was the woman who persuaded Naomi to take her back with her to Israel after both women were widowed. And the fourth woman Matthew mentions he simply calls the wife of Uriah. We know her elsewhere in Scripture as Bathsheba, the woman David saw bathing on the rooftop. It is as though Matthew was embarrassed to include her, because she was a part of one of the most scandalous cases of seduction, adultery, and murder in ancient history.

The simple fact that these women are even mentioned at all in the genealogy of Jesus is surprising, because Judaism emphasized decadency through men. But more importantly, their inclusion speaks of the mercy of God and His amazing grace which is available to every person of every race, every tribe and every nation. None of these women could claim a good Jewish pedigree. Tamar was a Canaanite, Rahab was from Samaria, Ruth was from Moab, and Bathsheba was married to a Hittite. Most genealogies in the Old Testament were intended to show that a family line had been kept pure from racial contamination, but it is as though Matthew goes out of his way to demonstrate that non-Jewish people were actually a part of Jesus' family tree.

Another thing that is striking about these four women is that three of them had been at one time in their lives sexually immoral. Few parents would have used the stories of Tamar, Rahab, or Bathsheba as positive role models for their children. "And when you grow up, I hope you will be just like her!" These scandals in the genealogy of Jesus tell us something about the mercy of God, which is Matthew's main reason for writing His gospel.

Later on, the Evangelist would say that Jesus came "*not for the righteous, but for sinners*" (9:13), and "*It is not the healthy that need a doctor but the sick*" (9:12). In the genealogy of Jesus Matthew shows us that Jesus came not only *for* sinners but *through* sinners! As Martin Luther once said, "Christ is the kind of person who is not ashamed of sinners – in fact, He even puts them in His family tree!"ⁱ

There are two things I think about when I reflect on the inclusion of these women in the genealogy of Jesus. The **first** has to do with **how I view myself**. These four women remind me that no matter how often I experienced rejection or how much I feel like I don't belong in this world, there's always for me a place in the family of God.

Have you ever been in a social situation when you were on the outside looking in? We all have. There have been times when someone looked down on us or we were excluded simply because of the way we were dressed, or we didn't go to the right school, or we didn't belong to the right sorority, or we didn't have the right circle of friends. We were ostracized and made to feel we were outsiders, we weren't acceptable, and we didn't belong.

The feelings of rejection we experience whenever we are made to feel like we don't belong can stay with you for a long while. You get defensive and play all sorts of imaginary conversations in your head defending yourself and making a case for why you should have been treated differently. Some people spend a lifetime trying to overcome that kind of rejection and earning the respect of people who said they didn't belong. You and I can waste a lot of time on the outside looking in, wishing they could find acceptance.

The genealogy of Jesus reminds us that none of us really belongs, none of us is good enough to be accepted by God, but He loves us anyway and He has made a place for each of us in His family. None of us is qualified to be in God's family tree, but He lets sinners like you and me in anyway. It isn't a matter of having the right pedigree or even living a holy life. None of that gets you in. Instead it's a matter of admitting we all fall short, and we need God's grace. It's saying, "I'm sorry, Lord, for how I've broken Your heart as well as Your law, and I know I need a Savior." None of us belongs, but God loves us anyway and He invites us to come as we are to His party of grace.

The **second** thing this genealogy reminds me of has to do with **how I view other people who are different from me**. Sadly, those of us who call ourselves Christians have developed quite a reputation over the years for looking down on people who don't have it all together and have made bad choices in life. We are viewed as a judgmental and holier-than-thou, and too many times the church has made people feel like they don't belong in the family of God.

In his book about grace, Philip Yancey tells the story about a friend of his who worked with the down-and-out of Chicago. A prostitute came to him in dire straits, and he asked her if she ever thought of going to a church to ask for help. The look on her face was one of shock. "Church!" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."ⁱⁱ

But Jesus gained a reputation as a friend of sinners, and He was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because He hung out with people like that so often. Somehow Jesus had a way of loving people no matter what they did while not approving of their life choices. I wish I could learn how to do that more. I wish sinners were drawn more to the Jesus in me. I think one of the keys may be if I'm going to err then I should err on the side of grace and not worry so much about what people think. Do the right thing even if people don't understand. Risk your reputation and reach out to people who don't have it all together. Be an agent of grace no matter what it costs you personally.

Think of the people you have the hardest time loving. Can you imagine them being loved and accepted by God? Can you picture them in the arms of Jesus, forgiven and included in His family of grace? If we can't do that, then you and I have some work to do, because Jesus always went after lost sheep and He rejoiced whenever a prodigal came home. No one is too far from the reach of God's love, and there must be room in my heart, and room in the family

of God, even for those hard-to-love people. Prejudice has no place in the heart of the follower of Christ, and His genealogy reminds us there are no outsiders in the kingdom of God. Whosoever will call on the name of the Lord can be saved.

Recently, I read about a pastor named Will Campbell who was a civil rights worker in the 1960s in Mississippi. Will was white, but he felt the injustice black people suffered in this country had to be confronted, and changes needed to be made. One day, his faith was put to the greatest test when an Alabama deputy sheriff gunned down Campbell's friend and co-worker, Jonathan Daniels, a Harvard Divinity School student. When Daniels approached a grocery store to make a phone call and arrange for a ride, the deputy sheriff named Thomas Coleman appeared with a shotgun, and he emptied it in Daniels' stomach. The pellets hit another person, a black teenager, in the back, critically injuring him. Daniels died instantly.

A skeptical friend of Will Campbell asked the pastor about the incident, and he pressed Will on how far God's grace could be extended to people. Did God love the deputy sheriff as much as He did Jonathan Daniels? Does God's offer of grace extend not just to people who are merely undeserving but also to those who in fact deserve just the opposite – like Ku Klux Klanners?

Will Campbell thought for a long while and then said, "Yes." And this message lodged so deep inside him that he underwent a kind of earthquake of grace. He resigned his position in the civil rights movement and became what he now calls "an apostle to the rednecks." He bought a farm in Tennessee, and today he is as likely to spend time with Klansmen and racists as he does with racial minorities. He decided a lot of people were volunteering to help minorities, but he didn't know of anyone in the world trying to minister to people like that deputy sheriff.ⁱⁱⁱ God's grace isn't just for those of us who are merely undeserving; it's also for those of us who deserve a whole lot worse.

Here at the beginning of Matthew's gospel we are given a picture of just how remarkable God's love is for each of us. He delights in calling the most unlikely people to Himself, and He wants all of us to know we are invited to become a part of His family. I don't care where you've been, I don't care what you've done, God wants every single person here today to be with Him this Christmas. That's where you and I belong. If Jesus wasn't afraid to have these four women in His family tree, then He isn't ashamed to have you and me in His family of faith either. There is room for each of us in the house of God – this Christmas and for always. So come on home. Thanks be to God for His magnanimous love and grace! Amen.

ⁱ Martin Luther, "Sermon on the Day of Mary's Birth," given September 8, 1522.

ⁱⁱ Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, p. 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Philip Yancey, pp. 141-145.