

## Finding our Roots

Genealogical research has long been a fascination for many, but it is all the rage these days. Christmas commercials abound for 23 and Me and Ancestry.com, among others. With a quick swab and a kit, you can send in a sample and be told where you come from in a matter of days. You can know where your ancestors traveled from and just how much of whose genetic material you carry in your bones. And if family members play along, you can discover just how much DNA you share with one another—23% with a grandfather, 50% with a sibling, 7% with a cousin. The technology is fascinating and gives extremely detailed information, but it cannot give you names. It cannot tell you the stories. It cannot unearth the memories. By contrast, the writer of Matthew is less concerned with the science of Jesus' background and more concerned to give us names. With these names come stories and memories. These names give us hints and insights into who Jesus is, perhaps more than any 23 and Me kit ever could.

Have you ever noticed that in doing genealogical research some people are quick to let you know if they've discovered that they are descendants of George Washington or Queen Elizabeth? Matthew connects Jesus to several of the big names in Jewish history: Abraham the father of nations and David, the king who captures God's heart. But there is more here than the connection to these two. There are many whose names are not the big ones, with syllables that are awkward to pronounce and stories that even the most learned among us cannot recall. And then there are the women.

You heard Jim and Sue read their names: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah, also known as Bathsheba. Maybe you know their stories well, but if you don't, you're not alone. Matthew is eager to draw a line tracing God's faithfulness from Israel's beginnings. He is keen to lift up Jesus as the promised Messiah, the long-awaited son of David, and yet he is also determined to draw that line in a very particular way. In this lengthy list of "begats," as the King James reads, Matthew refuses to let us nod off. He brings in the women and their mention is disruptive. So often in ancient texts the women are an afterthought in the stories of great men, but not here. Their mention is unsettling, but so are they. Through them the expected story is turned on its head. The way things are expected to go is not the way they go. They are outsiders and interlopers. Tamar uses her

wits to find a way not to be written off and discarded. Rahab is a foreign spy with questionable qualifications. Ruth is a foreigner from an enemy tribe. Bathsheba is drawn into the king's court by deception and winds up the mother of wise king Solomon. And Mary is a young bride whose courageous "yes" places her, her fiancée, and her entire family on the cusp of shame, ridicule, and ruin. In and through them God's promised future continues when it appears threatened. This line of promise extends unbroken in Matthew's understanding, stretching from old Abe with stars in his eyes, through slavery, defeat, and exile to this child named Jesus born under a star. It matters that Tamar and Rahab and Ruth and Bathsheba are included in this list, Abiud and Eliakim, too, because that means we're in there as well.

Genealogy is about discovering, unearthing our roots. One scholar argues that this genealogy is for those who have no roots, for a minority community living under Roman rule in the wake of the destruction of the Temple in the year 70. The kings named in that lengthy list are long ago memories. No true son of David sits on the throne. The promise God made generations ago once again seems to be lost for those who have been longing for salvation, for wholeness, for life in the face of disappointment and despair for generations without end. And the writer of Matthew wants to make it clear for them and for us: this one named Jesus is God's making good on that promise. The one they have been waiting for, the one we have been longing for is here. He comes not from some exotic place, but in the midst of the people of Israel, in the thick of the nations, through and to the ones who have been waiting all along. His roots are bound up in ours; he is one of us. And he is the one FOR us. Through detours, disruptions, disappointments, and despair, God has been faithful. And now, Jesus, son of Abraham and David, son of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, son of Mary, the Messiah is born.

Thanks be to God. Amen.