

“There’s Room for Every Story”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Advent 1

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Isaiah 2:1-5

Matthew 1:1-17

I remember, nearly 5 years ago, a very young girl in our church turned one year old. Little Sia’s arrival into the world had delighted her parents and her church, and it was such a gift that her parents chose our church as the place to hold her *doljanchi* ceremony. This is a Korean tradition which places the one-year old child in front of an array of symbols, each one representing a particular pathway for the child. Whichever symbolic item the child reaches for first tells a fortune of what their future may bring.

What I remember most about that day is not what Sia reached for— I am pretty sure that out of the judge’s gavel, the bowl filled with money, the stethoscope, and the paintbrush, she picked the stethoscope. But what felt even more important was that her parents, Jeff and Eunjoo, decided to choose the church to stand in as Sia’s family, when the rest of their family were oceans and continents apart. And, of course, I remember how darling Sia looked in her tiny hanbok dress.

The opening of Matthew tries to show us who Jesus’ family is and was. It’s interesting to note that the genealogy in Matthew traces from Abraham, then 14 generations all the way to King David, then from David through another 28 generations to Joseph, husband of Mary, who bore Jesus. But if we are looking for a blood connection from Jesus to King David, we won’t find it through Mary, Jesus’ mother. It’s Joseph’s line that stands in as family for Jesus, even though Mary filled him with her blood. We aren’t told anything about *her* lineage— even though the gospel tells the story as if Mary became pregnant with Jesus without any of Joseph’s help.

To be honest, it doesn’t matter so much to me whether Mary was a virgin or not; whatever way Jesus was conceived, his life and teachings are holy and significant to me and make real the concept of Emmanuel, which means God-with-Us.

I just got back from a Thanksgiving visit to Atlanta, my hometown, where I gathered for the first time in years with my extended family— on Thanksgiving, with almost all my aunts, uncles, cousins, and their kids from my mom’s side of the family, and the day after with all the generations on my dad’s side of the family. We also took an extra trip to see my Aunt Martha in her home, since she’s aged to the point that it’s physically hard for her to get out to visit. About 25 years ago, after her divorce, Aunt Martha adopted an African Grey Parrot. Aunt Martha is a musician, and she named her bird for her favorite composer: Bartok. In addition to imitating Aunt Martha’s southern accent to perfection, Bartok can also whistle the first measures of a number of classical songs. This species of bird lives to be—on average— about 60 years. Aunt

Martha is in her late 70's, and so she's on an active campaign to see which son, daughter, niece, nephew, or grandchild will want to become this young bird's second life partner. I have a feeling that even after Aunt Martha leaves us, her lyrical voice will stay in our family.

Matthew intentionally takes us through the generations leading up to Jesus because he wants the **voices** of Jesus' ancestors— whether through blood or through adoption— stay with us as we awaken to what Jesus means to us. Nancy may have stumbled through the long list of names in the gospel reading, but **each** story represented there matters.

I want to point out in particular the women— both named, and unnamed— who show up in Matthew's genealogy. It's interesting that Luke has a different version of Jesus' genealogy— and it goes all the way to Adam!-- but it doesn't mention any women. Matthew, however, mentions four.

The first is Tamar, mother of Perez through Judah. She was a woman who had been married to Judah's firstborn son, Er. But Er— who Genesis describes as "wicked"— died suddenly. The law of Levirate marriage determined that Judah must allow his widowed daughter-in-law to marry his next son, Onan. And so they did, but Onan didn't like the custom that any child he helped Tamar to conceive would belong in name to his deceased brother, Er. And so, instead of making Tamar pregnant, he "spilled his seed on the ground," the bible tells us euphemistically. God didn't like that, so God caused Onan to die— at least, that's how the story goes. I don't actually think God strikes people dead for what Onan did, so I suspect the bible writers got it wrong when they attributed Onan's death to that. Anyway, Tamar still is a widow without a child, but by then, Judah was too protective of his youngest son to give him to Tamar as his wife. And so he tells her to simply remain a widow in her father's house— in other words, live as a child without any rights to property or finances or social status. So, Tamar decided to take things into her own hands: she dressed as a prostitute and with a veil, and she found her father-in-law Judah on his way to shear sheep. Judah decided to use her services, not knowing who she really was. When he was done, he said he didn't have his cash on him; and since Tamar did not take Venmo, she asked for his seal, cord, and staff to hold until he could pay her. Later, when Tamar showed up as pregnant, Judah not only tried to shame her but also to burn her for her sexual transgression. But when she showed Judah that the father of her child also was the owner of the seal, he admitted that Tamar was more in the right than he was. So, this is the first woman mentioned in Jesus' ancestry.

Another woman in Matthew's genealogy to Jesus held the role of prostitute; her name was Rahab. She was a Canaanite prostitute, and she allowed shelter for Joshua and his spies when they were trying to scout out the land of Canaan, before they brought the whole wandering tribes of Israel from the wilderness, into Canaan to settle. When the king of Jericho sent his army to Rahab's house to find the spies, she hid them on her roof, and told the pursuers that the Hebrew men had left after using her services. She then told the spies she had protected how to leave safely. They in turn promised protection over Rahab and her family. Rahab— a Canaanite—becomes a woman remembered by name in Jesus' ancestry.

The next woman Matthew mentions in his genealogy to Jesus was also an outsider to the Hebrew people. Ruth was a Moabite; her people were pagans, and historically were considered enemies to the Israelites. And yet, Ruth moves from Moab to Bethlehem, following her mother-in-law Naomi after the death of their husbands. In her dedication to Naomi, Ruth becomes a model in the Jewish faith for what steadfast love means. Ruth ends up marrying Boaz, who was a relative to Naomi. Ruth has children and grandchildren; her great-grandson David becomes king over Israel.

The Me-Too movement did not yet exist when David was king. Surely his behavior would have been called out if it had, although you can tell the biblical writers tell it like it is without celebrating David's behavior. David, as I mentioned in my sermon last week, liked to spy on women while they were bathing. He saw Bathsheba taking a bath, and he sent for her, and he lay with her. Now, David was already married, and so was Bathsheba. But this encounter is more than a story of infidelity— it is a misuse of power. That transgression becomes even more clear when Bathsheba becomes pregnant, and since her husband Uriah had been away all that time fighting his King David's war, David had him killed in battle so that no one would know that Bathsheba's child was from an adulterous union— and then he married Bathsheba. She was the fourth woman mentioned in Jesus' genealogy.

It would be understandable if you had never noticed them. If you had never spoken their names. *Luke's* genealogy from Jesus mentions dozens more people than Matthew, but doesn't say these women's names or reference them at all: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba. Each woman crosses some sort of boundary— it may be an unbounding of what is possible from a woman's power; it may be crossing the boundary from a trauma to a triumph, or it may be crossing over physical borders. Some commentators say that the women in Matthew's genealogy prepare Matthew's readers— which started as a primarily Jewish audience— to open their minds to Gentiles being vehicles for God's grace.

Some of us can remember the day when little Sia reached for the stethoscope. I wonder, if Mary and Joseph had had this tradition when Jesus was a baby, if he would have reached for the farming and feeding tools over the sword and the spear. I wonder if he would have reached for the Gentile guest instead of the (mostly) well-bred descendents of David surrounding him. I wonder: would he have reached for you? For me?

We are made to believe he would, he did, and he does— as far as his body could stretch.

Jesus reaches for each one of us, because each one of our stories matters to the story of Jesus— a story which has not yet ended.

I know when we told stories at my family gatherings, as we always do, we mostly told the stories that made us laugh and remember. We told the stories that showed us the essence of who the subject of the story was. We told the stories that gave evidence for our love for one another. We teach the stories that share the lore of our family, including those who have passed, with the youngest generation. But peeking out of the shadows of all those funny, sweet, and heroic

stories, you could sometimes see corners of stories no one loves to tell, but those are there, too: stories of failure, stories of shame, stories of loss.

And yet still. If the bible can tell us anything, it's that no story, and no person, is beyond redemption or beyond use for the telling of God's larger story. If we lay out all our stories, generation after generation, best we can, we can find ways that God was and is at work in these stories. That's good news for you and for me. It means that whatever we bring to God's story is an important strand.

I challenge you this Advent to consider yourself part of Christ's family. Write yourself in to his collection of family stories. Consider how his story has a place in your story, and your story in his.

I look forward to what the next chapter of our story in the story of Jesus Christ brings.