

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Services of Holy Eucharist
The Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 22, 2019

“Five Women and a Man”

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25 and additionally the genealogy of Matthew given in Chapter One.

I'm not so sure about this *Joseph* character. Do we really know how he came on the scene, or what makes him such a fitting figure to be a responsible parent to the *Savior of the World*? Sure, the scripture says Joseph is a “righteous man”, but maybe that is just good public relations. Being raised in the South, I am conditioned to pay attention to pedigree, even though my own is extraordinarily ordinary. And given that Matthew, the writer of this morning's Gospel, seems to be interested in the family lineage as well, I turned immediately to the genealogy Matthew offers regarding Jesus earlier in the first chapter of his gospel, and what one finds there is, frankly, quite shocking for one we call the *Son of God*.

Now, don't be misled by any of this “Jesus, the son of Mary” business, because when Matthew provides Jesus' qualifications for the position of Messiah, he takes great pains to let us know that Jesus is a son of kings through the line of his daddy, Joseph. Oh sure, we're far from royal palaces and important, powerful positions by the time we get to this simple carpenter; nevertheless, if Matthew is to be taken seriously as a genealogist, Joseph can call the great King David, the famed author of

the 23rd Psalm, his direct ancestor. Royal blood flows through Joseph's veins, though nobody in this time of Roman Empire, except maybe Matthew and an angel of the Lord, really cares. But for the sake of good form, let's take a look at Joseph, shall we? You can join me. [Invite congregation to turn to Matthew 1 in their pew Bibles.]

At verse 1... *An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*" (Now bare with me. Hold onto your ears and follow along if you like...)

"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, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz BY RAHLAB, and Boaz the father of Obed BY RUTH, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon BY THE WIFE OF URRLAH, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam..." and so forth and so on, until the kingdoms of Israel are destroyed by their enemies and carted off to Babylon.

Then at verse 12... *“And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel...”* and so forth and so on, until we get to verse 16 *“...and Jacob [was] the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.*

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.”

Very tight. Very symmetrical. Very ordered and appropriate, don't you think? Maybe so, but it's really quite scandalous!

In all the genealogy of Jesus from Abraham, the father of the faith, through all the kings of Judah, all the leaders of the kingdom in exile, all the little known and unknown grandfathers and great-grandfathers, did you notice the five women who in some inexplicable fashion take their place within this decidedly masculine order? Tamar, a widow at least twice over, childless by her deceased husbands, a seductress who disguises herself and lures her father-in-law, Judah, into bed, so that she might have a son by him; their son, Perez, a child of seduction and fornication, and... an ancestor of Jesus, *Son of God and Savior of the World.* And what of Rahab, whose profession is the so-called “oldest”? Rahab, quite likely a prostitute of Jericho, who

provided shelter for the spies of the Israelites who came to case her city for war. It is Rahab who is mentioned as the mother of Boaz, so Boaz is the child of a prostitute, and another ancestor of Jesus, *Son of God and Savior of the World*. It doesn't stop with Boaz; he is so bold or misguided as to marry Ruth, a Moabite woman, not a daughter of Israel, his own people, but a foreigner. The races continue to mix, and their son, Obed, becomes an ancestor of Jesus, *Son of God and Savior of the World*. And of course there is King Solomon, regarded as one of histories wisest and richest men, who came to power in Israel after his father, King David, and built the Temple in Jerusalem. But Solomon was the son of David's adultery with the wife of Uriah the Hittite (another foreigner), who David arranged to be killed in battle, so that he might take the unfortunate soldier's wife to be his own.

Jesus has a colorful history at least, does he not? From where did Joseph, this parent to the *Savior of the World*, come? Well, he came from the world, like the rest of us. His history colored by the faithful and faithless decisions of his ancestors. His pedigree mixed, as befits a people who are not perfect, but real, and who are trying within their limited and imperfect means, to be followers of the God they had come to know and to trust. Joseph was a son of faith and hope born from a people who even to this very day continually trust in the providence of God to care for them. And Joseph's fore-mothers, were shrewd, strong, faithful, daring women who did not

wilt in the face of danger or prejudice or misogyny or scandal or pain or adversity. Joseph's is a hearty lineage indeed, this son of women, of kings, of foreigners.

But I mentioned five women. And, of course, she is the one who remains most in our minds and hearts at this season of the year: Mary. Likely a very young woman, betrothed to Joseph at an early age, pregnant, threatened with scandal, without any worldly means to speak of. She is a perfect addition to this peculiar pedigree. A shrewd, strong, faithful, daring woman with the presence of heart to become one of this big, sort-of happy, kind of peculiar family.

You know, the name Mary is derived from the Hebrew *Miryam* and is often interpreted to mean "sadness" or "bitterness," but some scholars hold that Mary's name can also mean... "rebellion". And I think... how perfect. In a time and a culture that could have required that Mary be put to death for her pregnant "indiscretion," in a time and an empire when power and riches and Romans were everything, these two rebellious Jews from a little backwater village with their mixed pedigrees and humble stations had the chutzpah to agree to what may be the most rebellious act ever: to be parents to the God of love coming into a hurting, often heartless world. And in our time, when people are tempted or even taught to look with fear upon those unlike themselves, or to think themselves better than other

people of God's making, or to be divided from each other as if we must be enemies... what a different vision we have in the story of Mary and Joseph and their child Jesus... born of questionable pedigree and to humble and caring parents, courageous enough to love him and to trust in the unusual ways of our God.

Everything is changed and challenged by Christmas: our notions of appropriateness, our dependence upon positions or possessions, our ideas of class or perfection or righteousness, our prejudices against those different from us. All the blessings, blots, and blemishes of our humanity are right there... within the *Savior of the World*. Just check his pedigree. Jesus was born from humankind... to humankind... to all of us, not just some of us. This is Emmanuel, God with us, even in all our weaknesses, our confusion, our sinfulness, our struggles, and our divisions. And when Jesus was born, I am sure his parents deeply loved him. Just as they were deeply loved by their Creator. Like you are. Like I am. Like all of us.