

# The History of Grace

First Sunday of Advent, 2009

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Today is the first Sunday of Advent. I want us to look at Matthew's account of the coming of Jesus into the world. When persons begin reading the New Testament and start with chapter one of Matthew they sometimes give up. The first sixteen verses contain a list of names that are hard for us to pronounce. And yet those sixteen verses cover the span of most of the Bible in a few short words. Each of the names reminds us of the story of a person in the Bible. Many people have the misconception that the Old Testament message is one of law and the New Testament message is one of grace. Actually the message of the whole Bible including the Old Testament is the story of God's grace. The genealogies of Jesus capture the history of grace in the Old Testament. I wish we had time for all sixteen verses but this morning we will focus on the first six.

## Matthew 1:1-6

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham:

- 2 Abraham was the father of Isaac,  
Isaac the father of Jacob,  
Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,
- 3 Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar,  
Perez the father of Hezron,  
Hezron the father of Ram,
- 4 Ram the father of Amminadab,  
Amminadab the father of Nahshon,  
Nahshon the father of Salmon,
- 5 Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,  
Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,  
Obed the father of Jesse,
- 6 and Jesse the father of King David.

David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife,

Several powerful themes emerge in these few verses. First of all we see that the gospel is not good advice, it is good news. Matthew does not begin with the words, "Once upon a time..." Fairy tales, legends and myths like Star Wars begin with those words. They signal that this is just a beautiful story, but it did not really happen. Matthew begins with the words: "This is the genealogy of Jesus Christ..." The story of Jesus is grounded in space and time. It really happened. This is history. Why is that important to know? It makes the gospel good news, not good advice. Advice is counsel about what you should do in the future. News

is a report about what has already happened. Fox News byline is: “At nine it’s news. At ten it’s history.” Advice urges you to make something happen. News urges you to acknowledge something that has already happened and elicits a response. How do you respond to a news story? Sometimes you ignore it. Sometimes you get upset. Sometimes you get amused. Sometimes you feel called to action in response. When we heard about Katrina and the devastation in New Orleans and along the coast, many people responded by volunteering to go and help. Others responded by donating money to help. We contributed several thousand dollars to help pay the salaries of pastors whose churches were wiped away and congregations scattered. When news hits us, we respond.

Christmas is not good advice, it is good news. Christmas is not advice on how to live your life better. If Christmas is just an inspirational story, what does it inspire us to do? To become shepherds? To practice natural childbirth in an animal stall? No, Christmas is a record of what has been done. Other religions give advice about how to be saved. They tell you what you should do in order to save yourself. If you pray a certain number of times a day, if you fast regularly, if you obey the rules, you will find your way to a spiritual experience. It depends upon what you do.

The gospel says “Jesus is the spiritual experience.” He is the way, the truth and the life. Christianity is not primarily about self-improvement. Christianity is not primarily about inspiration and guidance. The gospel is inspiring and the Holy Spirit does guide us, but that is not primary. The gospel is about the record. Do you believe that it is historical fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem; that he performed miracles like healing the sick, casting out demons and raising the dead; that he was crucified and died; and that he rose from the dead? If you believe that happened, how will you respond? Will you ignore it? Will you get upset? Or will you respond by taking action? Will give your life to Christ in response for what he has done for you? The gospel is not good advice, it is good news.

Secondly, we see in these few verses that all great stories are based upon the truth. The so called elite modern writers today focus on realistic fiction and snub epic myths like Lord of the Rings and Chronicles of Narnia. Modern writers prefer to present raw stories about the ugliness of life. The most popular movies and books are about the epic struggle between forces evil and the forces of good. They tell stories of heroes and villains. Even though they are not true, there is a longing in our hearts to hear these stories. They speak to us at a depth that modern realistic fiction cannot touch. We want to hear stories about the supernatural, persons escaping death, a love that endures despite all odds. Many of these stories contain a theme of longing for home. Usually the characters have been forced to leave home to join in the battle against the forces of evil. They speak often of returning to a peaceful place where people live in harmony. In the Lord of the Rings, the Hobbits speak longingly for the shire. The elves speak fondly of Rivendell. All of these echo the great Biblical theme of the Garden of Eden. We know that paradise is our real home. A beautiful place where there is peace and where we live in harmony with one another and with the world.

Christmas is an epic story. Someone comes from outer space to visit planet earth. He has miraculous powers to calm storms, heal the sick and raise the dead. The forces of evil attack him and kill him. It looks like evil has triumphed. But, then, he rises from the dead and overcomes the forces of evil. Death cannot hold him.

Is the Christmas story just another epic story like “Scrooge” or “It’s a Wonderful Life”? Is it just another inspirational story? Matthew says no. “This is the genealogy of Jesus.” This is good news. This is about what really happened in space and time. Jesus is not a story that points to the underlying realities of life. Jesus is the underlying reality to which all the great stories point. Jesus is the validation of the longing in the human heart for good to triumph over evil and for life to be eternal. Jesus is real. Jesus happened. How will you respond?

Thirdly, we see in the genealogy of Matthew that Jesus turns the values of the world upside down. We refer to this passage as a genealogy. But it is really Jesus’ resume. In

Biblical times who you were connected to - your family tree -was your resume. A personal family history was how you presented yourself to the world. For us a resume lists our education, our skills and abilities, our experience. It is considered bad form to list your family as your references! But in Biblical times, the strongest part of your resume was the list of your family connections.

When we prepare our resumes sometimes they are not totally complete. There are things we choose to leave off our resume. For instance, if you went to College A and you partied your freshman year and flunked out, you might not put that school year on your resume. You enrolled in College B and graduated. Why put College A on your resume at all? We tend to leave off the bad stuff.

The persons in Biblical times were no different. If they had a black sheep or two in the family tree, they tended to skip those generations on their resume. They did not want anyone to know they were connected to them.

Jesus turns the usual resume upside down. His genealogy contains the good and the bad. In the ancient world no one would put a woman on his resume. Women were considered second class. Yet Matthew includes five women in Jesus' genealogy. Unheard of. On top of that the majority of these women were not Jewish; they were Gentiles. A self-respecting Jew would never list Gentiles in his genealogy, especially female Gentiles: Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites. Ruth was a Moabite. These nationalities were despised by the Jewish people. Yet here they are on Jesus' resume.

Not only was Tamar a woman and a Gentile, she tricked her father-in-law into impregnating her. Sounds impossible! She pretended to be a prostitute and Judah hired her services. She became pregnant and revealed that Judah was the father. Now that sounds awful, but Judah said she was more righteous than he! Why? Because Judah as the head of the family was supposed to take care of Tamar, and he failed to do so. Tamar had married one of Judah's sons. He died before they had children. According to culture of the day, Judah

was to have one of his other sons take her as a wife and any children they had would be considered heirs of the first husband. Judah gave her to a son as a wife, and he refused to get her pregnant, and then he died. Judah has lost two sons and decides this lady must be a black widow. So, he sends her back to her parents. That was a big no-no in ancient culture. Judah was responsible to see that her first husband had an heir by one of his other sons. So, Tamar took matters into her own hands and tricked Judah. This is a pretty juicy story, and I've cleaned it up substantially! Tamar gave birth to twins and one of them, Perez, is in the direct lineage to Jesus. Deception and prostitution in the family tree. You would think Matthew would have left out that story.

But, instead, he includes more. Next there is Rahab. She was a Canaanite and a bona fide prostitute. We get to verse 6, and it appears that Matthew is finally getting to the good stuff. Jesus has royalty in his family tree and not just any king—Jesus is a descendent of Israel's greatest king, David. It was prophesied that of his kingdom there would be no end. The Messiah would come from his family tree. Then Matthew adds this phrase: "David was the father of Solomon whose mother had been Uriah's wife." Why did he have to drag that up? It was David's darkest moment. Uriah was one of David's trusted soldiers. Uriah had protected David when King Saul sought his life. He was on the battlefield fighting for the king, when David committed adultery with his wife and she became pregnant. David arranged for Uriah to be killed in battle and took his wife, Bathsheba, into his harem. He thought he got away with it. But, a prophet Nathan confronted him with the truth of what he had done.

Prostitutes, adultery and murder--all in the family tree of Jesus. Why does Matthew mention all these scandals? All these people who were outsiders and sinners Jesus is bringing into the kingdom. The grace of Jesus Christ covers all sin, even the most scandalous. The gospel of Jesus Christ is about what God has done for us. All of stand in need of his grace. We all have scandals in our lives and in our family tree. In Jesus Christ, prostitutes and kings are regarded as equals. In Christ there is neither male nor female,

neither Jew nor Gentile. All of us are sinners saved by his grace. No matter what we have done, what Jesus has done is greater still. He has cancelled out your sin by his death upon the cross in your place. He has forgiven you of all your sin. He is not ashamed of his genealogy. Thank goodness, because we are all in there.

The world values success, pedigree and appearance. Jesus turned it all upside down. He wrote the ultimate reality story. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. All of us. The good news is that Jesus died for us so that we could be forgiven have eternal life.

The gospel is good news, not good advice. The gospel validates the truth of all great stories. And, the gospel turns the values of the world upside down. How will you respond to the good news?