

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, December 12, 2021

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## **Matthew 1:1-5, 17-21**

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

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 Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

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.

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

It was a pastoral decision to skip verses 7 through 17. There's lots of names in there. They become progressively more difficult to pronounce. I have issues. I go on Bible Gateway. They have this little audio feature where you can hear really smart people pronounce all those names. I did that for six verses, and that was enough for me. You should go back though 14 generations, and then 14, and then 14 again.

Matthew begins the storytelling with the genealogy of Jesus. It's interesting because, in storytelling, setting the hook is critical. Whether in written or spoken word, a storyteller has only a few precious moments to gain the listeners attention. A few years ago, a writer and game designer named Mark Laidlaw gained some internet notoriety by tweeting an ingenious suggestion. He suggested that you could make the opening of almost every story more

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compelling simply by adding a particular second line made up of just five words. Mark suggested that any storyteller should add, 'and then the murders began.'

So, let's apply that to the beginning of some well-known stories. It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom and the age of foolishness. It was the epic of belief in the epic of incredulity. It was the season of light and the season of darkness. It was the spring of hope. It was the winter of despair, and then the murders began.

Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents grumbled Joe lying on the rug, and then the murders began.

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do. Once or twice, she had peeped into the book her sister was reading. It had no pictures, no conversations in it, and what is the use of a book thought Alice without pictures or conversations, and then the murders began. On the 15th day of May in the jungle of Newell in the heat of the day in the cool of the pool he sat splashing enjoying the jungle's great joys when Horton the Elephant heard a small noise, and then the murders began.

I wonder what Piglet is doing thought Pooh, and then the murders began.

What makes this line so effective? How does it work? Surprise. We aren't expecting it. It catches us off guard. We begin the story thinking it's going to be one thing, and then suddenly it becomes something else altogether. Whatever we first thought it was going to be, it has now become a matter of life and death. That line is effective because it disorients us. It disrupts our equilibrium, our sense of narrative balance. It serves to wake us up and make us wonder what's next. If this is how the story begins, we ask ourselves, how in the world is it going to end?

I think Matthew missed the day in writing class where they talked about setting the hook. It begins with the genealogy. It's devoid of flair at least upon first reading. It goes through 14 generations, and then 14 more, and then 14 more with plenty of names that might not mean a whole lot to us this day in time. But it's interesting because he lays it out for us. It's much more of a theological than historical genealogy that Matthew presents to us.

As I was reading it and thinking about this morning's sermon this week, I thought about a particular class in seminary. It's a class on marriage and family therapy. It's the time when we, as seminary students, were supposed to be equipped in all the ways to help walk with people through marriage. Different kinds of family dynamics. Part of that work, of course, begins with our own work, so before we can step into the holy space of one's marriage or one's family and listen, we have to do our own work first. So, I called up my dad and made the drive to Greenville. I said, "We got to do something called a genogram. Do you know what that is, dad?" He said, "no, but come on we'll do. I've done the family history. We can do it." So, I got up there, and he said, "now tell me what this is." I said, "Well, what we're supposed to do is we're supposed to map out our entire family, at least that we can remember. Right, and then what we're supposed to do is for each of the relationships we're supposed to either draw a squiggly line or a

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dotted line. We're supposed to actually in this genogram we're supposed to explain the different relationships between each and every family member. So, let's just start with our nuclear family and then we'll go from there." I pulled out a sheet of eight and a half by 11 white paper and one pen, and he started laughing. He said, "we're going to spill a lot of ink today, son. You better get another pen." We spent the next couple hours drawing squiggly lines and straight lines and dotted lines. If you've ever done this practice with your family, it's eye-opening to see all the different ways that you or other members of your family might be enmeshed or have unhealthy relationships or have great and loving and kind relationships amongst your family. We got done, and he said, "wait who's going to see this?" I said, "The whole class." He looked worried.

You know, it's interesting because this church isn't always a place where we feel free to talk about our families and the dynamics that come with them, whether our nuclear family or our extended family. And yet each of us comes with a family history that is significant. So, what Matthew might have missed in in writing class about setting a hook, he does intuitively know about family. It is complicated.

He knows that if he is to begin this story, he must begin by telling the story of Jesus's family. So, we're clued in to pay attention and ask ourselves if we hear what Matthew hears as we read this genealogy of Jesus?

Taking us all the way back to Abraham and then forward through a number of people, all the way to Mary and Joseph, wise men and wise women, brave women, brave men, kings, and prostitutes, the powerful and the disconnected from power, survivors of violence and assault, and perpetrators of it, despised outsiders, desperate refugees, saints, and sinners. Matthew wants us to hear that Jesus comes from a dysfunctional family, and that the people of God might together say amen in hearing this truth.

I was at a conference a few years ago, and I got to hear a woman speak named Liz Huntley. Liz serves on the board of law school at the University of Alabama now, but she grew up in Northern Alabama. Her mother was known as 'Queen Bee.' She was the largest distributor of heroin in North Alabama. When Liz was five, her father was arrested and her mother dropped her off at her grandmother's house, and her mom disappeared forever. she never saw her again.

Liz found herself in what we would call a rigid home, where demands were many and love was seldom expressed.

In the midst of her journey, she happened to hear a preacher unpacking the genealogy of Jesus, getting into detail about each of the relationships and what they might look like. She said it was "the first time in my life that I heard a story of a family that wasn't too different from my own. I needed to see and hear and know that I wasn't the only one that came from a complicated family history."

Hearing Liz's words makes me ask do we hear what Matthew hears? Do we hear what he wants us to hear this day? Matthew wants us to hear what Frederick Buechner would later write "that

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joy”, and I would add hope, and peace, and love, “it’s a mystery because it can happen anywhere at any time even under the most unpromising of circumstances, even in the midst of suffering with tears in its eyes.” Matthew wants us to hear at least that and probably more this day. Matthew begins with this telling of the genealogy so that we might from the very beginning of the story know that no matter what our story is, we have a place in Christ’s story.

So, this morning as you read that genealogy, as you go home from this place and maybe read those 17, those 7 through 16 verses that we skipped this day, as you go through each of the names and maybe do some cross-referencing as you would like, I want you to remember a few things. If your family history or your current dynamics are painful and difficult, if it feels like the dysfunction of your family might preclude you from experiencing hope or peace or joy or love , you are not alone. Christ is present there. If you are a parent worry to death that you might mess something up so terribly that it cannot be redeemed. you are not alone. Christ is present there. If you are tempted to believe as you go out into the world that someone is somehow disqualified from the family of God, you are not alone, but you are wrong, because Christ is there with them too.

Sometimes we need a surprise hook to make us want to attach to a story to determine that this story is important enough for us to pay attention to, but sometimes the most surprising element of the story is when the author decides to tell the unfiltered truth that the Messiah of the world, God with us, came through a messy line of people who could at one time exemplify all that it means to embody love in the world and another what it means to embody violence. People who understood power, and people who were at the will of it, people who were poor, and people who had great wealth, people who were broken and people who were made new in the image of God. In this advent season, when we ask ourselves what it is that Matthew desires for us to hear, I think it’s at least this - that God does not desire our perfection. God desires our faithfulness. God can take messy situations and draw out of them love and joy and peace and hope.

God can do that, and indeed does, in the story of the good news of Jesus Christ, and if this is how the story begins, can we only imagine how it ends. In this advent season, I wonder what it might look like for us to tell the truth of our stories, and to trust that hope and peace and joy and love might happen even from the most unpromising circumstances. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen