

A Long Line of Grace

Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 1:39-45

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Dec. 20, 2009

Whitefish UMC

- † In case you haven't noticed, the airwaves and print media continue to buzz with the salacious details of Tiger Woods' indiscretions. The once revered and squeaky-clean championship athlete's life spins further and further out of control.
- † Have you noticed how often the commentators use the term "fall from grace" to describe Tiger's condition? Of course for most of them, it's just a common colloquialism, not a theological description.
- † But many of us could agree that Tiger might benefit from a dose of spiritual self-examination. And he wouldn't be alone. Last weekend, the writers on the long-running *Saturday Night Live* parodied with wicked accuracy the long line of formerly exemplary family-men in public life who have suffered from the same fate.
- † The headlining sketch featured actors portraying former Senator John Edwards, Governor Mark Sanford, and Senator John Ensign lamenting that they were no longer the primary focus of media attention—thanks to the exploits of Tiger Woods.
- † What makes these celebrity scandals so newsworthy is the discrepancy between their public personas and their private lives. It's one thing when we are open about our frailties. It's another matter when we pretend to be above reproach when we aren't.

- † But what, you're asking, rightly, does this have to do with the genealogy of Jesus Christ that we just heard? And what does this have to do with preparing for Christmas and the coming again of the Messiah into our midst?
- † Last week we heard Luke's version of the Annunciation by the angel Gabriel to Mary. Luke's Gospel, for the most part, tells the story of Jesus' birth from Mary's perspective. Matthew's, on the other hand, takes Joseph's point of view.
- † Our Christmas pageants usually combine the two stories, but when biblical scholars attempt to reconcile the conflicting material, they can't. For example, did Mary and Joseph live in a house in Bethlehem where Jesus was born, or did they live in Nazareth and go to register for a Roman census in Bethlehem, where Jesus was born in a stable because the inn was so full?
- † Did they flee from their house in Bethlehem into Egypt to escape Herod's child-killing rampage after he had been tipped off by the magi; or did they return peacefully home to Nazareth after the Bethlehem census-taking with nary a mention of Herod?
- † It's tempting to just pretend that it all fits together as we portray it in the pageants, but there is value in reading both Matthew and Luke's birth narratives as stand-alone witnesses to the core message of Jesus' coming into the world.
- † The great biblical scholar, Father Raymond Brown, makes a compelling argument for preaching the first 17 verses of Matthew's Gospel during Advent. Even though it's difficult to pronounce all the names, Father Brown asserts that these verses contain the essential

theology of the Old and New Testaments for the whole Church, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant alike.

- † What difference does it make that the very first lines of the New Testament contain the lineage of Jesus, all the way back to father Abraham? The great Swiss Reformation pastor Zwingli preached that they contained the foundation of Christian faith: that of salvation by grace.
- † The story of the origin of Jesus Christ, from Matthew's perspective, begins with Abraham begetting Isaac; no mention of that deserving elder son, poor unfairly banished Ishmael. Then Isaac begets Jacob; not a word about his elder brother Esau whose birthright Jacob stole.
- † Jacob begets Judah and his brothers; why is Judah chosen and not the good and extraordinary Joseph, of coat of many colors fame?
- † What's going on here? According to Matthew, being faithful to Old Testament theology, God does not necessarily select the noblest or most deserving person to carry out divine purposes.
- † And that's the interesting part. For reasons unknown to us mortals, God may select the Judahs who sell their brothers into slavery, the Jacobs who cheat their way to first place, the Davids who steal wives and murder rivals—but also compose profound and beautiful songs of praise.
- † Now this next part is my favorite: what about the women Matthew chooses to include? There aren't many of them—only four in that long list of names. But there is no mention of Sarah or Rebekah or Rachel, the upstanding patriarchal wives of Israel.
- † Instead, there's Tamar, a Canaanite, who disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced her father-in-law Judah to get a son out of him.

- Then comes Rahab, another Canaanite and a real prostitute this time. Next is Ruth the Moabite, another outsider.
- † Finally the list includes Bathsheba, mother of Solomon. She is named only as the wife of Uriah, whom King David had killed so he could marry her himself. Every one of these women used as God's instrument had scandal or criticism attached to her—as does the fifth woman named in the genealogy: Mary, the mother of Jesus, with her unconventional pregnancy.
 - † What a motley mix of less than conventionally-well-regarded people! But this will fit in with Jesus' coming ministry to tax collectors and sinners and prostitutes and lepers, "to those who need a physician," not those who are already righteous.
 - † Matthew's genealogy is showing us how the story of Jesus Christ continued—and would continue to contain—the flawed and inflicted and insulted, the cunning and the weak-willed and the misunderstood. His is an equal opportunity ministry for crooks and for saints.
 - † Then there is that final fourteen generations of unknown, or unremarkable names that Dick read this morning. Who in the world was Azor, or Achim? Who was Eliad, or Eliezar? And Mthan, who was, according to Matthew, Jesus' grandfather? What on earth did they do to make the list? What kind of people were they?
 - † We don't know. You won't find their names in any concordance or biblical *Who's Who*. You won't find their names anywhere else in the Bible or in history. And this, of course, is where Matthew's message finds us.
 - † If so much powerful stuff can have been accomplished down through the ages by wastrels, betrayers, and outcasts, and through people who

were such complex mixtures of sinner and saint, and through so many obscure and undistinguished others, isn't that a pretty hopeful sign?

- † For isn't then God likely to use us, with our individual flaws and gifts, in all manner of peculiar and unexpected ways? Who can say that we are not in the process of being used right now, this Advent, to fulfill some purpose whose grace and goodness would boggle our imaginations if we could begin to get our minds around it?
- † Philip Yancey, one of Tom's favorite authors and someone who really speaks authentically about the struggle to tap into the heart of faith, has written about how we sanitize the Christmas story. He notices that all the Christmas cards he gets feature serene scenes and people bathed in golden light.
- † The explicitly religious cards (a distinct minority) focus on the holy family, and you can tell at a glance these folk are different. They seemed unruffled by the challenges they are facing. Bright gold halos, like crowns from another world, hover just above their heads.
- † And yet the Christmas story as told in the Gospels, in Matthew and Luke, remind us that God chose to come and be born among the most ordinary, flawed, messy people and places. But we seem to need to make them different, more special, more perfect than we are or could ever hope to be.
- † And that's missing the point. Then what is the point? I think we find it in stories of everyday lives, like the one in Friday's *Daily Interlake*. The writer told of students at Kalispell's alternative high school, *The Laser School*, many of whom are facing challenges not too different from those of Mary and Joseph not so very long ago.

- † Some of the students are teenaged girls pregnant with unexpected babies. Perhaps they understand the Christmas story better than many of us. Each day, the article said, the students pass around a jar for money to be collected to provide toys for children at Christmas—the Toys for Tots program.
- † Even though they need a lot themselves, they recognize that they can be a part of the grand saga of sacrificial love that is the true message of Christmas. I suspect their lives are anything but sentimental portrayals of peaceful holiday scenes. Yet they plunge forward into a drama that welcomes them with all their struggles and faults and mistakes.
- † So what about us? In what way do you fit into the ongoing genealogy of Jesus? Father Brown suggests that a thoughtful reflection of Matthew’s genealogy encourages us during this season of Advent to continue the story of the sequence of Jesus Christ in this way:
- † “Jesus called Peter and Paul...Paul called Timothy...someone called you...and you must call someone else.”
- † Maybe somebody should even call Tiger Woods. And John Edwards, and Mark Sanford, and John Ensign, and, well, you get the point.
- † Your story may not fit into the scene of a Hallmark card this Christmas season. But perhaps you are fortunate enough that it does. Either way, the message of the birth of Jesus is for you. God loves you in your particularity, loves the whole world, so much that God joins us in the beauty, the hope, the peace, the joy, and the sorrow and struggle of our lives.
- † And that sacrificial love will heal the world if only you will be a part of it. I pray that you will. Amen.

Sources:

Father Raymond Brown, The Birth of the Messiah. New York, 1993.

Gail Godwin, Evensong. New York, 1999.

Philip Yancey, "The Visited Planet," in Watch for the Light.