



Naming Our Roots
Deuteronomy 6:4-9

I grew up in a family of immigrants. My grandparents came to this country just about a hundred years ago, after long journeys that began as they were escaping a genocide of the Armenian people in Turkey. When I was growing up, my sisters and I loved to listen to my grandmother tell stories about our family. There weren't a lot of them; much of our family history was lost in that war. But both my grandmother and my mother were wonderful storytellers, and they gave us a picture of our family that was very different from what seemed like normal—the middle class American life we were living here.

One of those stories involved my grandfather—my mother's father. He was just 16 when the war came, and the story I remember is that he hid under a haystack when the Turkish army was coming to kill all the Armenian men and to march their women and children away. Then my Grandpa stowed away on a ship that was coming to America, and he ended up in New York City, where he found a job washing dishes at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. I love that story. And I repeat it often when I tell people about my family background.

Maybe a year ago, I was talking to my mom one day about our family history, and I mentioned this story to her. "That never happened," she said. "There was no haystack. He didn't stow away on a ship. I've never heard that." What?! Where did those stories come from, if not from her? I was so disappointed!

We never did figure it out. But I'm sticking with my story. I've seen my grandfather's name in the books at Ellis Island, and I'm pretty sure he worked at the Waldorf. I like that image of my grandfather, as a swashbuckling stow-away. That story tells me something about the courage it took to cross the Atlantic Ocean on a big ship to get to a place that promised safety and hope for a good life—not only for himself, but for the family he later brought over to join him. Many of you know all about that kind of courage, I know.

Our history—the stories we tell to explain who we are and where we came from—is made of the stories we choose to tell. Even the family trees that we think of as containing our historical or biological roots—genealogies you might research with great care—even they include entries that someone chose to record, to write down. And over time, these *selected* stories become our

history. They say where we belong, who we are connected to; and they say something also about who we *want to be*.

I am learning that African culture knows this better than European culture does. I was so confused at first, at how many sisters and brothers Daniel seems to have, how Olive could be *everyone's* auntie. But I am beginning to understand. We are family, those relationship names say; we are connected to one another by something even deeper and more lasting than our blood.

Genealogies have always been a part of human life. From the very first stories in Genesis, people who were trying to love God traced their history back to the first people in the stories of God. By the fifth chapter of Genesis, the Bible begins to list the descendants of Adam, the generations that tied whoever was telling or hearing the story to the first human: Adam, created in God's image. (Genesis 5:1-5) Later in the Bible's narrative, God began to identify himself, every time he appeared, by his connection with the ancestors; "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." (Exodus 3:6) I am not a stranger to you, that introduction seems to say; you know me, because I knew your father and your grandmother, and their parents before that.

But I also notice that there are people missing from these genealogies, parts of the story that get left out. No women, first of all. Where is Ishmael, Abraham's other son? The people who lost wars? Or Cain and Abel, the first two sons of Adam who feuded to death?

We tell our history in a way that reminds us of who we are—but maybe even more importantly, we tell it in a way that affirms *who we want to be*.

In the stories that were first told about Jesus, genealogy was important. Who was this person? Where did he come from? Who were his people? Not everyone told that story the same way, and the Bible is honest about those contradictions. The people who first read Matthew's Gospel were Jewish, and so Matthew knew it was important to trace Jesus' history as a direct descendant of Abraham and David, the most powerful Jewish king. Luke wrote his Gospel for a different audience—people who did not see themselves anywhere in the lineage of a Jewish king. Luke's readers were common people, poor, mostly not Jewish. And so Luke's genealogy of Jesus includes names that even biblical scholars would find it hard to recognize: Joda, son of Joanan; Cosam, son of Elmadam. Nobody we've heard of. And right along with Matthew's Gospel, Luke's story says something important about Jesus: that he was not *just* the Jewish Messiah; that he came to save the whole world.

Is one of these stories true and the other not?

Ancestry is not just about biology. It traces more than physical traits and DNA. It's a handing down of the things that have shaped us: patterns of faith and doubt, goodness and stubborn sin, joy and desperately hard times. When we name our ancestors, we name the parts of ourselves that matter to us. We trace backward the aspects of our lives that have made us—and are still making us—who we want to be.

In this church, I want to be the descendant of Evelyn and Earl Buck, who invested deeply in a community that their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren could find faith in.

And I am that—we all are—as we stand underneath those beams in the Fellowship Hall that Earl put up with his own hands. I want to stand in the same line of pastors as Dick and Bobbie Corson, and Paul Kim, and Ben Gould, and Daniel Gbundema. When I tell the story of what my life and work are about now, I tell your stories; of what you made of this church long before I got here, and of how your people came from West Africa to Campbell, and of how we are working together to make the church into a community of faith for this time and for the future. You are my saints, the people who are shaping my story. You are the ones whose words and actions are teaching me what it means in this place, at this time, to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, and with all your might.” Together we are writing those words on our hands and our foreheads, on the doorposts of these buildings, and on our children’s hearts.

Today we observe an ancient ritual of the Church: remembering the saints—in the church and in our own lives. Honoring ancestors is a universal custom; it is done in every culture and every religious tradition. In the Christian tradition, we acknowledge that that not all ancestry is carried in the blood; it’s a *spiritual inheritance* that we honor on All Saints’ Day. We are naming the roots we are holding on to, the ones that still carry to us nourishment for our best and most faithful selves. Some of our saints are family members, people who slowly, over many years, have loved us in a way that showed us how God loves us. Some might be public figures—people who have given their lives for justice, who have demonstrated for us how to love with a big and open heart. Some of these are people who are dead; some of our saints are those living right alongside of us still.

In just a moment, as we sing the next hymn, take the cup of glass stones that’s on the inside edge of your pew and pass it down your row. Take a stone from it, or maybe two, for the people you want to remember today, or maybe to represent a whole bunch of saints in your life. When you come for communion, you can drop those stones in the big glass vase at the front, and all our saints will join together and surround us.

We are surrounded by saints—both in this beautiful sanctuary and on the paths each of us is walking when we leave this place. When we remember them, we are also naming our best hopes—for ourselves and for the world: to be kind, to love each other well, to be honest and full of wonder when we encounter something greater than ourselves. And maybe—just maybe—as we watch them, we are taking on their features, adopting a family resemblance. Maybe we are becoming saints too.