

Illuminated by a Promise: Out of the Shadows

Matthew 1:1-17

When I was growing up, my family had a tradition of sticking toothpicks in a potato to help my sisters and me count down to Christmas. I realize now that this was my mother's low-cost alternative to an Advent calendar, but it was always a matter of great ceremony in our house. Every morning one of us would have the honor of pulling one toothpick out. I can still remember that sort of fluttering feeling in my stomach when I was little, as the last four toothpicks became three...and then two...and then one.

In case you haven't noticed, we're there, for this Christmas. Most of the doors on Advent calendars are already open, and most of the toothpicks have been pulled out of the potato. If you've been waiting to get everything else done before you started thinking about getting into the Christmas spirit, it's time. If you're trying to take care of everybody else before you breathe in this Christmas yourself, it's time to stop and take that breath.

I heard a piece on the radio the other day that said that most families in the U.S. have not gone back to the level of Christmas spending they had before the great recession of 2008. I have no idea how they measure these things, but that feels true to me. Does it for you too? I've heard a lot of conversations about spending less, cutting back on gifts, being more careful. And while we all know, I think, that none of these cutbacks affect the meaning of Christmas, still it's an adjustment for us. There's a connection that has been deeply ingrained in us, between lavishness and extravagance, and a *good* Christmas. Those commercials on television that advertise a new Lexus sitting in the driveway with a bow on top of it look impossible, and even a little silly, but I'd love to be able to give someone a car for Christmas—wouldn't you? We talk every year in my family about limiting the cost of our gifts to one another, or whether it really is OK to make *only* a charitable gift in each other's honor instead of gifts. And still, those conversations make me worry a little about losing one of the tangible ways we say to each other, "I know you and I love you."

All of these things add to a sort of low-grade anxiety in these last days before Christmas Eve. Will Christmas this year be what we want it to be? What it's *supposed* to be? What it *used* to be? What if it's not?

There's another little anxiety that begins to set in about this time, about the family gatherings that are coming in the days ahead. The longer I have done ministry, and heard people's stories about their lives, the more convinced I am that most of us walk around feeling as if our own family is deficient in some way. Everyone else has a "normal" family, we think; but mine is a little weird. There's a cousin who's in prison, or a brother-in-law who drinks too much, or a child who won't come out of her room to say hello to her grandparents. There's this person who's permanently attached to me who can't get or hold a job to save his life. A family member whose absence is awkward. We

have step-children related to adopted grandparents, whose birth mother brings her new boyfriend. No one else could ever understand how complicated and convoluted the relationships in *my* family, we think; because *they're* all gathered around the turkey in a Norman Rockwell painting. Our families have a unique capacity to remind us just how human, and how flawed, we really are.

Here's my pastoral bit of wisdom to you this morning, taken from many years of both pastoral and legal counseling: *Everyone* feels like this. *No* family is "normal". *Every* family is dysfunctional, at least a little bit.

We just read a family genealogy this morning, the history of another family. The piece she read, from Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, may seem to you like the most unimportant and uninspiring part of the whole story of Christmas. But Matthew knew what he was doing. He had an idea about why it was important to lay out all those names—some famous and some very obscure—before he even got to the announcement of Jesus' birth. Matthew put this part of Jesus' background *first*, as if to say, "You have to know this before you can understand who Jesus is. This list of names tells you something important about what God is trying to do here."

Biblical scholars have suggested that everything most important about the Old and New Testaments can be found in these three minutes of tongue-twisting names. Raymond Brown, who was a 20th century New Testament scholar, wrote extensively about the meaning hidden in this genealogy, and if you've ever read Gail Godwin's novel *Evensong*, you have seen this already.

Matthew's account of the genealogy of Jesus begins with Abraham as the father of Isaac. You know this story: Abraham and Sarah had trouble conceiving, and it wasn't until late, late in their lives—long after they had given up hope—that God promised them descendants who would be a blessing to the whole earth. Isaac was the child of that promise. But Matthew leaves out—leaves to our memory--Abraham's other son, Ishmael, who came out of Abraham's union with a servant; and who was abandoned because of Sarah's jealousy, and the constant arguing in that household.

Isaac becomes the father of Jacob, but there is not one word about his older brother Esau, whose birthright Jacob stole, and all the years they didn't speak to one another. Jacob begets Judah, Matthew reminds us, and eleven more brothers...but why is Judah mentioned, and not Jacob's favorite son Joseph, who went to Egypt and became advisor to the king?

And who are the five women Matthew includes in his genealogy? None of them are the upstanding wives of the patriarchs of Israel: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel. Instead, Tamar—a Canaanite woman who disguised herself as a prostitute and seduced her father-in-law. Rahab, another Gentile woman. She really was a prostitute—by profession. Ruth, who also was not born Jewish, one of the chosen people. Matthew includes Bathsheba, the mother of King Solomon. And she is named only as the wife of Uriah, the man King David had killed so that he could marry Bathsheba himself. Every one of these women

who figures in the genealogy of Jesus had a scandal attached to her. So does the fifth woman in this set: Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was pregnant while she was still a young girl, and unmarried.

And then Matthew recites a final fourteen generations of Jesus' ancestors—a whole list filled with what seem to us unknown and unremarkable names. Who was Azor, or Achim? Who remembers any story connected with Eliud or Eliezar? Or even this Matthan, who was, according to Matthew, Jesus' great grandfather? What did they do? What kind of people were they? What do we know about them that merits their placement in a short list of ancestors to the Messiah?

Nothing. That's the amazing thing. *That's* what Matthew wants us to notice. For reasons that tell us something important about who God is, this list includes saints and sinners and nobodies right in *front* of the story of the Messiah's birth, the story Matthew knows will change the course of humanity.

Without their doing anything to deserve it, God was able to use for his extraordinary purpose Judah's who sold their brothers into slavery, Jacob's who cheated their way into first place, and David's who were sociopaths—brilliant, but arrogant enough to steal other men's wives and murder their rivals. Sinners and prostitutes and pregnant teenagers and unambitious ordinary folks who seemed to accomplish nothing significant in their lifetimes. Somehow, for thousands of years, from Abraham all the way to the birth of Jesus Christ, God accomplished what he needed to through people who wasted time, betrayed one another and ended up as outcasts. The people on this list are either complex mixtures of sinner and saint, or obscure and undistinguished. We would never imagine them useful to God at all.

And maybe that is the good news of Christmas: that God is capable of bringing to life, even out of a motley crew like this, his own child. Just like us, these people *whose names are in the Bible* hung on to what they knew and did the best they could. Just like us, they lived their ordinary lives, paid the bills, went to work, and tried to love their less-than-perfect families.

The busy-ness of this season can make us long for a calmer, more centered, less encumbered life. Barbara Brown Taylor has noticed that the way we talk about that life often has the word “up” or “above” in it. We want to “rise above” our anxiety, or the messiness of our families. Sometimes we just want to “keep our heads above water.” It's like we imagine the good life would transport us into some place “up there”—where everything is beautiful, less complicated, more right. But, she says, the message of Christmas is God-with-us, not God-up-there-somewhere. The God who came on that first Christmas day, and who comes again to us, does not lift us out of our lives. This is the God who comes to us in the midst of those lives—however messed up our families are, however far from home we find ourselves, however less than ideal our circumstances. This is the family that God is born into: *your* family. Right here, just as it is. You do not have to remove yourself from your own life, or rise above it. None of God's escalators are taking people *up* on Christmas. All of them are coming down—

bringing the One who can save our lives to find *us*, and to share our untidy, rumped-up realities.ⁱ

The most unlikely people have always heard and answered the call of God to come. The overly ambitious Jacob, the arrogant and lustful David, the too-young Mary. So maybe we too can figure into the genealogy of some great thing that God wants to accomplish in this world. It is never the right time, and we are never ready. It will always seem like we have things we have to do first, more important places to be. Our families are not strong enough; we are not good enough. But maybe the message of Christmas is this: with God *anything* is possible.

And so I invite you, this Christmas, to imagine yourself in the genealogy of Jesus' coming to be among us again, in this community, in your family.

Maybe the genealogy goes on: . . . Mary who bore Jesus, who called Peter; and Peter called Paul, and Paul called Timothy, and on it goes . . . until someone called you; and you too, by the example of your life, will call someone else. You too are an ancestor to the God who comes again and again, always to lead us into the fullness of life.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, p. 23-24.