

Called through Heritage

Matthew 1:1-6, 16-17

¹ An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

² Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, ⁴ and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of King David. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, . . .

¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

¹⁷ 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.

Hebrews 1:1-5

¹ Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³ He is

the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

⁵ For to which of the angels did God ever say,

“You are my Son;
today I have begotten you”?

Or again,

“I will be his Father,
and he will be my Son”?

Theme Statement

The story of God's redeeming work through Jesus doesn't start with his birth. People of faith across the ages have lived in the hope of a definitive word from God and the affirmation of our earthly existence. That word is Jesus.

Exploring the Word

A sometimes disputed saying suggests that history is written by the victors. People of the Judeo-Christian faiths, however, proclaim that the last, the least, and the lost are the focus of God's activity in creation. This placement of God's presence in the very realities of human life gives purpose to a different mindset and the living out of a countercultural narrative. This narrative challenges the status quo and compels those who live in it to embrace an identity foreign to the surrounding system.

Matthew 1:1-17 Generation to generation

The gospel writer presents the story of Jesus' advent as the pinnacle of God's plan that started with creation. Matthew constructs a listing of Jesus' ancestors not to represent a historical account but to weave a pattern of God's plan

from Abraham to Jesus. This was to draw the reader's attention to God's purpose, which is rooted in time and across place. Matthew's first readers would see this list as more of a story that breaks out of the cultural norm of paternal lineage by including five women (vv. 2-6, 16). For us, the mention of women in a genealogy is not surprising. What seems culturally correct for us today would have caused earlier readers to stop and ponder.

Verse 17 allows Matthew to structure Jesus' genealogy in three sets of fourteen generations. The breaks between the generations are marked by King David and the deportation, two formative events in the nation of Israel.

A second genealogy of Jesus is found in Luke 3. While the individuals listed in this pedigree differ, Luke joins Matthew in connecting Jesus with God's plan to bless all the nations from the beginning. While Matthew's genealogy begins his narrative of Jesus' life, Luke includes the listing after the childhood narratives. Some commentators attribute this placement, along with Luke's inclusion of many priests, as the way Luke saw Jesus' priestly role in his crucifixion.

A focus on ancestry and the detailing of Jewish lineage took on greater importance after the Babylonian Exile (586-538 BCE). The connection with one's heritage structured social status as the nation returned to the land. The first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles contain extensive detailing of family lines. In some instances, this meant a sense of pride and exclusivity. Jewish scholars attribute the destruction of many carefully recorded genealogies to Herod the Great (died 4 BCE), done for his own political purposes.

By the time of Jesus' public ministry, the Sadducees, who were the priestly leaders of the temple, claimed their legitimacy by tracing their ancestry. In contrast, the Pharisees,

who focused on following the letter of the law, claimed authority through their knowledge of it. Matthew presents a genealogy with a different purpose.

Following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, both Christianity and Judaism struggled with their religious identity and relationship. By starting with Abraham, Matthew's lineage of Jesus reflects God's promise to Abraham and Sarah to bless all the nations through their descendants. The inclusion of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, all Gentiles, further reinforces that the promise of God's blessing was to all people, not just a single nation.

Hebrews 1:1-5 The word in focus

The introductory statement of faith (vv. 1-2) launches the book of Hebrews with words that may have been part of an early liturgy. The writer does this to create trust with the readers by citing common beliefs in a litany they already know.

The history of God's revelation described here includes concentrated times of different voices, visions, events, and dreams, brought to the people through the prophets. This is in contrast to a single source of revelation. The writer declares that in the person of Jesus, God continues that revelation in ways that are both the same as in the past and also unique (vv. 3-4). Jesus is more than just the next person in this line who proclaims God's word; he is different in that his presence and proclamation are to a new expression of God's called-out community. He is the ultimate expression of God's word (v. 5).

Many individuals listed in the gospel genealogies are virtually unknown, yet important enough to be included because they did their part in moving forward God's plan.

The Word Today

If we're honest, reading through a list of someone else's ancestors is a bit of a chore. It's much more interesting if that list traces our own lineage. Knowing from where we have come can give us some sense of identity and purpose. It grounds us in a time and place. We, too, may not be famous, nor may the things we do even be memorable, but we join those named in the family of faith in awe of God's patient work in creation. We worship out of that sense of awe and thanksgiving.

We live in a culture where who we are and what we can become is not always limited by our ancestral pedigree. In fact, portions of our population have the option to shape that pedigree through their education and accomplishments. They choose where they study and earn a living, focusing on the best institutions of learning and companies or agencies. Association with those institutions and companies may even drive otherwise upstanding people to take unethical actions to see that their children get accepted to them in order to build a future résumé. At the same time, even more people, equally talented, have neither the resources nor the connections to access these life-enhancing experiences.

Matthew's "begats" passage and the first verses of Hebrews 1 proclaim that God's grace is a result of God's actions, not ours, nor even our predecessors'. God's call through the gospel is offered freely to all and establishes a spiritual heritage regardless of our status. When we realize this, we simply respond with "Thanks be to God."

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Would you rather be known as the descendant of a famous scoundrel or of an unknown commoner? Why?
2. How might knowing one's ancestry influence one's attitudes and actions?

Exploring the Word

1. Make two lists of people listed in Jesus' genealogy from Matthew: those familiar to you and those you don't know. Your leader will compile the group's lists.
2. Pick one person from each list and find out additional information about them. Based on what you learn, what does their inclusion tell you about God's grace?
3. The Hebrews passage starts with what sounds like a worship liturgy. What part of current worship liturgy might the writer use today to bring the same message?

The Word Today

1. In your community, how are the following characteristics ranked in order of importance?

___ education	___ ethnicity
___ ancestry	___ religious affiliation
___ wealth	___ other _____
___ employment	
2. How does a person's focus change when they begin to understand the implications of God's grace in their life?

Closing Prayer

God Almighty, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ: Grant us, we pray, to be grounded and settled in your truth by the coming of the Holy Spirit into our hearts. That which we know not, reveal; that which is wanting in us, fill up; that which we know, confirm; and keep us blameless in your service; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(ELW, p. 86)

Further Study

Luke 3:23-38; Luke's genealogy of Jesus

Daily Readings

M. Psalm 2	F. Hebrews 1:6-9
T. Ephesians 1:1-14	S. Hebrews 1:10-14
W. Ephesians 1:15-23	S. Matthew 1:1-6, 16-17;
T. Matthew 1:6b-15	Hebrews 1:1-5

Memorization

Hebrews 1:2

In these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.