



Matthew 1:1-17
 Forgotten Christmas
 “People From The Past”

Rev. Brian North
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This morning we embark on a journey through Advent, and a new series of messages to go with it. A few summers ago we did a series on the minor prophets, which are some of the books of the Bible we tend to overlook and forget about most easily. And: **We tend to do something similar with the birth narratives of Jesus: There are a number of people that we tend to overlook.** We know Joseph and Mary; the angel Gabriel plays a prominent role; the wise men are forever emblazoned upon our brains thanks to the gifts they brought, and they’re stuck in our ears with what maybe my least favorite Christmas song – We Three Kings. Sorry if you love that song...it’s just never sat well with me. Even the innkeeper is portrayed as the villain in the birth narrative, and we all know about him...even though there’s no innkeeper ever mentioned anywhere in the gospels.¹ We know more about him than we do some of the people who actually lived.

But there are other people and events of the Christmas story that tend to be forgotten. So: **We’re starting a series this morning called, “Forgotten Christmas” where we will look at some of those people and events.** Now, if you were with us last week, you’ll recall that we saw King Xerxes turning to the historical record of his kingdom to help him fall asleep. Well, today we get to read a part of Scripture that can easily put you to sleep as well: the ancestry of Jesus. This is perhaps the most forgotten Scripture passage in the New Testament. So, take a sip of coffee, sit up straight...and if you couldn’t think of anything to be thankful for this past week, then you can be grateful today that you’re not having to pronounce all of these names. ☺ This is God’s word to you and me today...(Matthew 1:1-17). **(Sermon Graphic)**

This last June I planned for this sermon series, like I did then for all of our sermon series this fall through the end of next summer. And when I sat down this week to really dig into this passage, I read it and I thought, “What on earth was I thinking?” Fortunately, when I plan these things out I put down a paragraph or so of ideas, questions, thoughts, and so forth, that help me understand what I was thinking at the time I picked a particular passage. And what I want to suggest to you is that in this passage that we think of as boring

bedtime material akin to counting sheep...**In this list of people from the past: we find hope.**

When we think of “hope” so often we think of the future. And with good reason, because what we hope for is always something yet to come or yet to happen. No one hopes for something that they already have, or already experienced, or accomplished. I don’t hope to graduate from high school or get another business degree from the UW. Been there, done that. Hope is all about the future. We hope for healing from an illness; we hope for the pandemic to end; we hope for reconciliation of broken relationships; we hope for forgiveness when we’ve hurt others; we hope for a new job when we’ve lost one; we Huskies hope for a better Apple Cup outcome next year than we got this year...the list goes on and on. These are all about the future.

But why do we have these hopes, and what gives us any reason for believing that our hopes have any chance of coming to fruition? Because, let’s be honest: if we don’t think there’s really any chance of them coming to fruition, then there’s another word for that: hopeless. We are hopeless about a situation when we don’t see any possibility that the future we would *like* to happen, actually *could* happen.

When something like a natural disaster hits, or a plane crashes...or that building in south Florida that collapsed several months ago...for a while in those situations there’s hope about survivors and finding them. But as time goes on and no more survivors are found, we start to lose hope. Those become hopeless situations. The operation changes from “rescue” to “recovery.”

But we have hope in life for the future because of what we, or others, have experienced in life in the past. In other words: **The past gives us hope for the future.** We can remember how we, or other people made it through a tough time – like a cancer diagnosis, a spouse’s confession of an affair, a divorce, the death of a loved one – ...we remember those times, which gives us hope when facing similar challenges that we can make it through the current situation. We remember how God moved – again, either in our own lives or in the lives of others...we remember how God moved to get us or

others through a situation: a miracle that happened, the support of our church family, Scripture verses that sustained us, and so forth. And we can turn again and look for God in similar situations when we encounter them again. So, the past gives us hope in the midst of a difficulty.

So, we might wonder: **What's the hope that we find in this list of people from the past?** It *is* kind of an obscure passage of Scripture. Even if we know it's there and we know there are things we can learn from these people, we certainly don't know who all the people are. None of these verses are in the top 10 Bible verses to commit to memory, right? Heck, they're not in the top 100 (I looked...they're not on anyone's list). They're not like John 3:16 or Jeremiah 29:11, or Philippians 4:13. Those are verses that give people hope – God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, so that whoever believes in him would not perish, but have eternal life; “For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “plans to prosper you and give you hope and a future;” “For I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” Those verses scream out “hope.” But a genealogical list of people who lived half way around the globe 2,000-4,000 years ago or something like that? What's the hope in these forgotten verses that largely lists forgotten people?

There are at least three ways God brings hope to us through this list of people from the past. **First, we see in them that God works in surprising ways through surprising people.** Yes, there are people here listed who are not so surprising and we know and recognize on a first-name basis: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon and perhaps some others. But even some of them were surprising, initially. Like David. He was the youngest of 8 sons and the last one to get looked at to be king. It was a surprise that he was chosen. But the four women listed here are particularly surprising: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Bathsheba's name is not listed, actually, but verse 6 mentions Uriah's wife. That's Bathsheba. Normally, in a genealogical record from this era, you only find the men listed. So, it's a surprise to see these women here.

Additionally, at least two of them are not of Jewish lineage – they're Gentiles. That's Ruth and Rahab. Tamar probably was a Gentile as well – her name isn't particularly Jewish. And then Bathsheba married Uriah the Hittite,

which means she married a gentile, and so she would have been regarded as a gentile even if her ancestry was Jewish. Additionally, all of these women except Ruth were well-known for the sins that they committed, so they're surprising for that reason. Having said that, we should remember that every person on this list – up until Jesus – was a sinner. Some – like David – sinned big. Speaking of surprising people: Mary and Joseph themselves are a great example of this. They are two people who were not on anyone's list of rising stars in the Jewish faith. And yet, God worked through them, too.

So, however you look at it: we see here that God works in surprising ways through surprising people. Maybe you feel like your sin or your ethnicity or your position in life is a strike against you when it comes to God working in your life or working through you for His purposes. Let these people give you hope, that God specializes in surprises.

Second, we see here that God can carry us through difficult times. So this genealogical list is in three groups of 14, roughly correlating to three significant periods in Israelite history. The third group of 14 people began, during the Babylonian exile. When verse 12 says it was “after” the Babylonian exile, it doesn't mean after it ended, but after it began. That was arguably the darkest period of time in Israel's history. And yet, here they are a part of the genealogy of Jesus. And at this point we should acknowledge that this isn't really the genealogy of Jesus – at least not from a biological stand point. In fact the word Matthew uses in verse 1 that is often translated as “genealogy” more literally means, “The book of the origin of Jesus.” This is the record of Jesus' origin *on earth* – and we have to remember that those words are introducing not just this list of names, but the whole gospel account. It's the beginning of the record of who he was and what he did.

To the degree this list of names is a genealogical record, it's the genealogy of Joseph, Jesus' earthly father who was married to Mary, his earthly mother, and she was the only one who actually had any kind of biological connection to Jesus.

So...that's a bit of an aside to this second point. God sustains us in difficult times: and **That Babylonian period was tough.** It's the low point in Israelite

history. But God continued to sustain them. He never forsook them. He was with them, even in the dark times, and even though they had turned their backs on Him. Similarly, you may go through some difficult times...some spiritually dry spells, some times of grieving, financial hardship, relational strife...who knows? We all go through challenging seasons of life. And yet this does not mean God isn't with us or can't work through us. God is there, he carries us along, and he will bring us out the other side. This is the ultimate hope we have in Jesus, of course: that even death, which seems to have the final word in the matter, doesn't. There is hope even in the darkness and sadness of the grave. So this is a great message of hope that comes out of the lives of these people: that God is with us even in the dark seasons of life.

Lastly, and this really in some ways encompasses the previous two points: **Lastly, God is a God of promise, and this gives us hope.** In the first verse we see Matthew call Jesus "son of David." We often know Jesus by this title. We see it elsewhere in the Gospels, as well. It's a reminder of Jesus' kingly role, not only in this world, but for eternity. But notice what else Matthew adds in verse 1: The Son of Abraham. The first verse reads, "An account of the origin ("genealogy") of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." A couple things to note here. First, genealogical records in the Bible usually are oriented around the patriarch of the lineage being followed.

So, we would expect this to say, "Here's a record of the lineage of Abraham." And then you'd expect to see a list of names that divides and gets wider the further it goes down through the generations. But this is completely backwards in how it's introduced. It's oriented around who it ends up at, not with whom it starts. It's oriented around Jesus. This tells us something of the emphasis Matthew wants to put on Jesus. Secondly, by going all the way back to Abraham, Matthew is helping us to see the promise of God to Abraham that is now fulfilled in Jesus.

Here's Genesis 12:1-3 (God speaking to Abraham), **"The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.**

**"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;**

**I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you”” (Genesis 12:1-3).**

So, there’s a promise to Abraham that through him God will bless all people. Later on, God reinforces this in a variation of this promise when he speaks of Abraham being the father of many nations.

And so: **Matthew is making a decidedly theological point here that Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise.** The word to Abraham some 2,000 years earlier is now fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus is *for* the world, not just a select group of people. And we are brought into that promise through faith...through believing in Jesus. Even that faith element is emphasized in Abraham’s life, and then reiterated in Jesus as well. So, Jesus is King, not just of the Jews, but for anyone and everyone who walks the face of the earth, who will submit to him as King...as Lord.

This fulfillment of this promise gives incredible hope to us. God does not fail us. God does not abandon us. God makes a promise, and his word is sure and certain. Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise to Abraham, and we are incorporated into it through our own faith in Jesus as well.

Even if we don’t take time to memorize these 17 verses and the names of all the people, I pray that we would not forget them this Christmas. More importantly, let’s not forget the hope of God that they represent. They may be in the past – the distant past – but God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, as Hebrews 13:8 tells us, and so we can gain hope for our own lives knowing that **God works in surprising ways and through surprising people; God is with us even in the broken and difficult seasons of life; and God is a God of promise.**

All of this together gives us hope. And it all comes from these people from the past: This is “good news from the graveyard.” Their stories of how God worked in their life, sustained them, and kept his promises to them, give us

hope for the future. Ultimately, the hope they lead to in a very direct kind of way, is the hope we have in Jesus. We are in relationship with a God who is in the business of giving hope – not uncertain “wish upon a star” kind of hope...but hope that is grounded in history... grounded in his story...as God shows himself to be faithful in so many ways through all kinds of people, and especially so in Jesus Christ’s birth, life, death, and resurrection. May you know this God of hope in your own life this Christmas season, and never forget it. Let’s pray...Amen.

¹ We looked at this a few years ago. The Greek is clear, that there was “no room in the guest room.” They slept in the living room instead. We know from archaeology that the living room and the “barn” (such as it was) were connected in homes of this time and place, with the animals being on a floor that was 3-4 steps lower than the living room. Their eating trough (“manger”) was on the edge of the living room floor, at the right height for the animals. Ask Pastor Brian for a copy of the sermon if you’d like more. You can also get a good synopsis here: <https://lifewayresearch.com/2015/12/04/christmas-urban-legends-no-room-at-the-inn/>. For a more detailed look at this, check out Kenneth Bailey’s book “Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes.”