

**The Sunday After Christmas
December 31, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

This morning is

- A little teaching
- A little story telling
- And a little bit of sermon

This morning we heard from the beginning of John's gospel ... what is often referred to as the "Prologue of John" ... actually an ancient poem or hymn.

- "In the beginning was the Word ..."
- "And the Word became flesh ..."
- Notice that according to John's gospel the divinity of Jesus was from the beginning of time.

In Luke's gospel which we read on the 4th Sunday of Advent, and then on Christmas Eve Jesus' divinity begins with the Annunciation ... Jesus is divine in Mary's womb.

The same is true for Matthew's gospel ... only the angel Gabriel came to Joseph instead of Mary to tell Joseph that the child the Mary was carrying was divine ... again Jesus is divine in Mary's womb.

In Mark's gospel there is no nativity story

- It begins with Jesus' baptism
- The Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus as he comes up out of the water
- In Mark's gospel Jesus is divine from the moment of his baptism.

So? Of the four gospels in our New Testament, most scholars believe that Mark's gospel was written first (55-70), then Matthew (70-80), then Luke (75-85), and finally John (90-110). Although we read from John's gospel this morning I'd like to look at the beginning of Matthew's gospel.

Ancestry search has become big business in the past decade. Ancestry.com; Genealogy.com; FamilyTree.com ... they all put together a picture of your family tree back for many generations. There was story just last night on the news of two men from Hawaii who had been best friends since the sixth grade. Independently of each other they did an ancestry and DNA search and found out that they were brothers ... they were both adopted as children.

But what happens when you find the skeleton in the closet ... almost literally. What happens when you find out the great, great Grandpa was a thief and spent years in jail? Or that great aunt Susie ran a house of ill repute in your hometown in the 1920s? Sometimes it makes for lots of good stories. Other times it can be a real embarrassment.

The opening words of Matthew's gospel are "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." To the casual reader it is about as exciting as reading a phone book. However, if you read it closely this genealogy is trying to tell us something beyond just a list of ancestral names in a family tree. For one thing it contains four women in a patriarchal society where women were mostly nameless second class citizens. This was an extraordinarily radical thing to do. Secondly, these four women were all of questionable character ... not what you would expect. So why begin with a genealogy ... especially one like this? Why air the dirty laundry in a book about the Messiah?

The first woman named in the genealogy is Tamar from the book of Genesis ... she gets mentioned in the third verse. Judah was a leader of the Israelites and had two sons. Tamar was the wife of Er, the eldest son of Judah, but Er died before Tamar had any children. In those times it then became the duty of the next son of Judah ... Tamar's brother-in-law ... to fulfill the duties of his dead brother. This is so Tamar would have a child and her place in the family would be secure. However, Judah's second son didn't like the idea ... it would cut him out of the will ... so he did and didn't so some things that are a little too graphic to mention from the pulpit ... but they are in the Bible. Anyhow, the second son also died leaving Tamar without any children. A few years went by with Tamar in an unresolved relationship with Judah and his family. Then Judah's wife died. Judah was now a widower ... and he was vulnerable. When Judah went out to bring his sheep to market Tamar dressed up as a prostitute and tricked Judah into using her services. Instead of payment for her services, Judah left his signet, a scarf, and a walking stick as collateral. When Judah sent a servant to trade the signet, scarf, and walking stick for a goat Tamar had gone into hiding. In due time she had twins. Then she went to Judah with the signet, scarf and walking stick as proof that he was the twins' father. Thus, Tamar gained her protection with her place in the family. Now, by the standards of the day, this whole episode was considered incest.

The next woman listed in Matthew's genealogy is Rahab from the book of Joshua.

(By the way, the name "Jesus" is a transliteration of the Hebrew name "Joshua." It comes from Yahweh ... Jehovah ... which means "God is salvation.")

Anyhow, Rahab was a known prostitute in Jericho. Joshua ... another leader of the Israelites ... was ready to attack the city of Jericho, so he sent two spies inside the city walls to scope out the defenses. While the spies were there they visited Rahab. Someone let the king of Jericho that the spies were at Rahab's house, so he sent his soldiers to find them, but Rahab hid them under some mats on her rooftop. Rahab sent the king's men on a wild goose chase, and then allowed the spies to escape down a rope from her window. As a reward for her actions the

spies told her that she would be spared when Joshua attacked the city fortress. To make sure they knew which house was hers, she was to tie a red scarf to the window ... this the the origin of the “red light district.” Anyhow, Rahab did survive the destruction of Jericho, she married, and eventually had a son ... the son’s name was Boaz.

So the next woman in this list is named is Ruth ... the Ruth for which a book of the Bible is named. Ruth was the daughter-in-law of Elimelech, and his wife Naomi. They were from Bethlehem, but because of a drought had moved to Moab where their two sons married Moabite women ... one was Ruth. The Elimelech died, as did Ruth’s husband, and Naomi and Ruth were left homeless. No longer welcome in Moab they returned to Naomi’s home in Bethlehem where they met Boaz ... Boaz as in the son of Rahab from the story before this one. Now Boaz was a man of some means, and so Naomi devised a plan to secure a place for her and Ruth in their new home. It was harvest time, and there was a party. After Boaz had eaten and become drunk, Ruth sneaked into his tent and lay with him. When Boaz awoke he was surprised, but ended up taking Ruth as his wife. So, Ruth and Boaz became the parents of Obed ... Obed was the father of Jesse ... and Jesse was the father of David ... as in King David.

And then the last woman mentioned is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Bathsheba was seduced by King David ... or was it the other way around? If you remember the story, Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah the Hittite, was away at war. Her house was right next to King David’s citadel. As he was out walking on his rooftop terrace one evening he looked down and saw Bathsheba bathing in her courtyard ... he had never seen a more beautiful woman. So David sent a servant to fetch her ... and then King David slept with her ... he was the king after all. (If that happened today she would be one of the #METOO women.)

So Bathsheba became pregnant while Uriah was away in a war. To cover up the obvious problem that David had, David called Uriah back from the battle so Uriah could sleep with Bathsheba ... that way Uriah would think the baby was his. What David didn’t count on was Uriah’s integrity ... he would not sleep with Bathsheba while his fellow soldiers were still out in the thick of combat. Frustrated ... and being the king ... David ordered Uriah back to the battlefield and told his commanders to send Uriah out into the thick of the fight, and then have the other troops pull back ... so Uriah was killed. With that problem taken care of David and Bathsheba lived happily ever after, and were the father of Solomon ... as in Solomon’s temple. This is the lineage that eventually led to Jesus.

Although this reflection is about the four women of questionable character who appear in Matthew’s genealogy, we have to remember that King David was the model for Jesus ... so we have to also wonder about his behavior and character as well.

The author of Matthew’s gospel decided to open his whole collection of stories about Jesus by saying that he descended from the incest of Tamar, the prostitution of Rahab, the seduction of Ruth, and the adultery of Bathsheba. Why would anyone ever open a book this way? This is not the stuff of a Sunday School class. I believe the reason that these women are included is

this ... all of the moral failures of the people who preceded Jesus did not stop God from achieving God's purpose. Indeed, they all ended up being important points in the story.

The early followers of Jesus realized that God can bring something holy out of any human shortcoming, inadequacy, or evil. If God was not hindered by these people ... these women of questionable character ... then surely God has not bailed on you or me because of our mistakes and missteps along the way. What this genealogy says to us ... at the beginning of the story about Jesus ... is that the grace of God revealed in Jesus reaches farther than our deepest vices ... and it therefore sets us free to extend grace to one another. When we see the way that God has loved us by emptying himself, we are empowered to love others in this same way. This isn't just a teaching out of the mouth of a prophet ... it is an example of the one in whom we see God comes out of a lineage of troubled background ... just like most of us.

I believe that God is alive in each of us just as God was alive in Jesus. If we are to know that divine life we have to move beyond our insecurities ... those mistakes and missteps we have made in our lives. If God can make us see God in the face of Jesus with a genealogy like his, then certainly God can make that divinity alive in us as well.

The message of Jesus is that no one is outside the love of God ... that no one is beyond redemption ... and that this God did not give up on the world, but chose to enter into the turbulent human experience as Jesus in order to reconcile the world to himself. That is what Christmas is all about, and that is Good News.

Amen.