

## **“Naming and Claiming Our Stories”**

Isaiah 2:1-5

November 27 2022 - 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

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This first Sunday of Advent is centered around hope. Hope in our stories, in our connections, in the natural world and our relationships, in our flaws and humanity, in the understanding that God is gonna call us by our full name and make room for us.

Have you had that experience? Your parent or an authority figure calls you by your whole name!? I knew I was in trouble when my mom would holler up the stairs, “Patricia Dawn!” And how many of us have used that tactic to get the attention of a child – those extra syllables, that full naming really wakes you up!

Our names, our identities, our stories – these are the focus of this week’s theme; emphasizing that there is room for every story. When you think about it, we hear different stories about Jesus throughout the New Testament, and some of them even contradict each other.

We just heard a great deal of effort put into reading the genealogy of Jesus. It was hard to read, and likely for many of us, hard to hear. Despite the fact that most people find the Bible’s genealogies dull reading, genealogies were not considered dull in their original context. Genealogy was actually a common feature of many ancient religions and sacred texts. The Hebrew people secured political or priestly legitimacy through kinship. The records established lines for passing on possessions and property, along with role, rank, and authority. Religious genealogies move beyond the economic and political, registering the handing down of religious practices or wisdom, that which is called “tradition.”

Since lineage confers political or spiritual authority, genealogy was a high-stakes literary enterprise. To claim that one was a son of blessing, like Jacob, or a son of a curse, like Esau, made a huge difference in the ancient world; quite literally the success or failure of a tribe or king rested on its claim to the right ancestry. As a result, biblical genealogies tend to conflict with one another.

The Bible's genealogies, and the contradictions in them, illustrate a long history of struggle and conflict, a process where different groups valorized their ancestors and in turn, valorized themselves. Not everyone accepted everyone else's version of ancestral authority, so they wrote their own equally glowing accounts of family. As a result, competing lists wound up in the Bible – such as the competing ancestry lists of Jesus found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Ultimately, Luke's story is far less regal than Matthew's. Luke's Gospel emphasizes Jesus' good spiritual ancestry, but lays out a universal genealogy, emphasizing the unity of the whole human family and telling stories about regular people being faithful to God.

The writer of Matthew presents Jesus as the King of the Jews: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” The claim is big and bold, directed toward a Jewish audience seeking both political liberation and spiritual empowerment during a time of oppression. Matthew proclaims that this Jesus, whose story he tells, embodied both King David's royal authority and the covenantal authority of Abraham. All God's promises to Israel are fulfilled in Jesus, who appeared to be the son of a carpenter, but was, in actuality, both King and Savior.

Matthew's genealogy includes 42 names, organized in 3 sets of 14: there were 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 generations from David to the Babylonian exile, and 14 generations from the exile to Jesus. The number 14 (twice of 7) could represent wholeness or completion, though it is important to note that many names (some evil kings and many of the matriarchs, in particular) are omitted from this list. As those many names rained down on your ears, keep in mind the vast range of stories represented here—stories of trauma, triumph, hardship, and beauty - all of which leads to Christ's story.

Just pulling a few of their names from today's text, we begin to scratch the surface of such stories.

Starting at the top, Abraham, of course, is considered the Hebrew patriarch of the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In Judaism, he is the founding father of the special relationship between the Jews and God, in Christianity, he is the spiritual progenitor of all believers, and in

Islam, he is a link in the chain of Islamic prophets that begins with Adam and culminates in Muhammad.

Rahab, one of only five women listed in this genealogy, was, depending on the translation, an innkeeper or a prostitute. She was a Canaanite, the first to ally with Israel. She assisted the Hebrews in capturing Jericho by hiding two of their spies who had been sent to scout the city prior to attacking it. She and her family were spared and incorporated among the Jewish people.

My favorite name out of all of these verses, is Jehoshaphat. He was the fourth king of Judah, son and successor of Asa. He was a good king and faithful worshipper of God who furthered the religious reforms his father initiated. However, to his disgrace, Jehoshaphat made a disastrous alliance with Ahab, King of Israel.

Each of these people adds to the tapestry of God's story, of Jesus' story, of our story.

The writer who provided the Biblical commentary for this season's worship materials is Dr. Christine J. Hong. And she observes, "Just as Christ's genealogy reveals the relationships across time and space in his life, many of our names also tie us to the generations who come before us and those who will come after us. Matthew lists the names of Jesus' forebearers as a marker of hope finally realized. Even today, names are the seeded hope of one generation planted in another. They are the thread that connects our histories, stories, and futures. We are the hopes of those who've come before, and we live in hope for those who will come after us."

Her reflection immediately sparked in me the memories and intentions in the naming of my four children. When I was pregnant with my oldest daughter, my dad approached me at one point and said, "Hey, you should name this baby after my mother." I was touched – my dad's mother died when my dad was four years old. Certainly, I wanted to honor her, but in 1990, I didn't feel super excited about naming my daughter Margaret. It happened that I had a chance to look through some family papers and realized that my paternal grandmother's maiden name was Sloane, and it clicked. Sloane is the name of my firstborn. And what a joy it was to revive a name in our family tree that was fading from memory because Margaret Sloane married and became Margaret Brady. This experience then led my husband and I to seek more details about the names and stories of family

members on both sides. Each of our three girls are named after maiden names in our family: Sloane, Corrigan, and Somer.

By baby number four, we were running out of names, and then we learned this kiddo was a boy. My husband's name is Paul, and he was the fourth "Paul" in his family. He was clear that he wanted a new name for our son, and he liked the idea of "gifting" our family tree with a new name. Because the girls all have Gaelic names, we bought a baby book of Irish names. With it, we gifted our family with our son's name, Kian. I loved the sound of it as soon as I heard it, and when we looked up the meaning of his name, we knew it was the right one – Kian, which means "return of the ancient one."

Each of us carry stories with us – stories of joy and pain, inherited stories, traditions, practices – that color everything we do and shape the way we understand ourselves, others, and the world around us. As we share stories with one another, as we listen deeply, we provide space for connection and transformation. So often, the particularity of a person's story touches on universal truths that we all can relate to.

If we bring our own stories, about our past, present, and future, into conversation with today's reading from the Book of Isaiah, we immediately hear the generational connections and the invitation to transformation. These verses describe "the future house of God," in which all of God's people are making their way to the mountain of the Lord. In the culture of that day (and in the Bible generally) mountains were places where people encountered God. For that matter, we all can relate to the idea of the "mountain top experience" in which people feel closer to the divine. We recognize the common storyline of the seeker making the pilgrimage to a spiritual leader serenely sitting at the highest point of a mountain range.

There are multiple references to "the nations" and to "many peoples," which align with our exploration of generations – people of diverse ages, experiences, backgrounds – all connected as the family of God. And Isaiah's prophecy paints a powerful illustration of regeneration – of weapons of war becoming plows that break up soil and shears that prune away dead branches.

As we take a few minutes to reflect on our own lives, this image provides us with a beautiful metaphor that invites us to think about the gifts as well as the baggage that we've inherited through the generations. What in our lives,

in our histories, in our stories, do we want to prune away to make room for growth, what clumps of earth or roots need to be broken apart so that we can plant new seeds? Where is God making a new path for you?

These questions might touch on something important for you. If so, I encourage you to sit with them during our short period of reflection.

Earlier this week, as I put together the bulletin (which needed to be printed sooner than usual due to the holiday) other reflection questions rose up for me, which are listed in your bulletin. It could be that as I shared my story or as you thought about what led up to Jesus' story, related memories of your own life came up for you regarding family names, or the makeup of your family, maybe even how the significant people in your life have impacted your own story. If so, the reflection questions in the bulletin might speak to you:

- ◇ What is the significance of names/naming in your family or in your life?
- ◇ How do people in your life add to the tapestry of your story?
- ◇ How is the complex genealogy of Jesus mirrored in families today? (What stories are given voice among blended families, families through adoption, or families who don't know their ancestry?) How does this create room for your story?

And I'll repeat the ones that aren't in the bulletin:

- ◇ What in your life, your history, your story, do you want to prune away to make room for growth.
- ◇ What clumps of earth or roots need to be broken apart so that you can plant new seeds?
- ◇ Where is God making a new path for you?