

Cindy Voth
January 6, 2019 – Epiphany
Waterford Mennonite Church
Matthew 2:1-12
“Roots and a Future”

This morning we received the gift of observing this familiar scripture passage being enacted by our children during children’s time. They retold the story of the magi coming from the East to visit the Christ child. The biblical word alludes to these visitors as being astrologers, ones who would interpret dreams, cast a vision for the future, and analyze messages from the stars. To us today in 2019 it might seem a little farfetched to call such professions wise ones, and yet at the time of Jesus’ birth they were highly esteemed, called wise, and observed as ones who practiced something that at the time was considered science.

This week several new things struck me as I dwelled with this very familiar text. The first ‘aha’ moment occurred already in verse one. “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.” As Pastor Neil mentioned several weeks ago, I too grew up dutifully placing the “wise men” in my family’s nativity scene, right next to the shepherds, the camel, and the sheep. I never really questioned why they were there, nor recognized the significance of their presence. Verse one tells us that these individuals came from the East. At first glance perhaps that doesn’t strike any of us as odd. And yet, these are the ones that are led to the Christ child by the radiant star - the star that shines brightly in the midst of darkness. And these individuals are considered “outsiders.”

Now, they are not the only outsiders in the familiar manger scene. Growing up I also never questioned the presence of the shepherds. I just assumed, well it is taking place in the barn. Sheep sometimes go to a barn. Shepherds go with sheep – viola – it makes sense. However, shepherds were also considered outsiders. Richard Gardner in the Believers Church Commentary

highlights that both Matthew and Luke report Jesus' birth being disclosed to a select group of persons

who then come to Bethlehem to find the child. In Luke 2 it is a group of shepherds, who respond to an angelic announcement of the good news. In Matthew 2 it is a group of astrologers, who respond to the message they deduce from a star in the heavens. At first glance the two groups seem totally unrelated. What have Palestinian shepherds to do with gift-bearing magi from the East?... In both cases... the news of Jesus' birth is revealed to a group of "outsiders" rather than to the faithful core of the Jewish people.

Shepherds were a lowly group on the margin of Jewish society, viewed by many as persons of questionable integrity. The magi were Gentiles from a foreign country, with no real link to Jewish faith and life. In both Matthew and Luke, therefore, the visitors who come looking for Jesus serve to underscore the universal significance of his birth. As outsiders in one sense or another, the magi and the shepherds represent the many separated or excluded groups who will be included in the salvation which Jesus brings."ⁱ

Suddenly the presence of the shepherds and the "wise men" in my nativity scene just took on a whole new level of meaning and significance. Instead of just naively assuming that of course they belong, this week I was challenged to grasp that God chose for the birth of God's son to be announced and celebrated by outsiders. Not only were they considered outsiders, but they were also then some of the first ones who spread the news of the joy-filled and joyful birth of the Savior.

The other significant 'aha' moment came to me in verse twelve – "And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route." Now a dream connected with astrologers might not seem odd, and yet it appears that God is directly use their typical mode of communication to direct them in a new way. Furthermore, earlier in the passage we are told that these outsiders followed the star, followed the light, until it stopped where the child was. Then in verse ten we were told "When they saw the star, they were

overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child and his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.” And yet after this seemingly significant, joy filled, powerful experience they turn and go back home. That really struck me this week. So God called to the magi. Giving them a mission to come. They obeyed, they followed, they were filled with joy, they worshiped. In a dream they were told to go home. They obeyed, they followed, they listened. This week I pondered anew the reality that the magi didn’t stay. They had this powerful encounter, this epiphany with the divine, and then they are charged to return home. Walter Brueggemann names that the magi must have been tempted to stay, given the joy that they had experienced.

Over the course of these weeks of Advent we have devoted time to look once again at the Old Testament prophets as they prophesied about a coming Messiah, the promised one, the righteous branch of David. We read of the faith community that was eagerly and impatiently waiting for the arrival of the one who would ultimately set them free and bring restoration. And we reviewed all of the prophecy, and sat with those who have been waiting. This week I was struck to see the significance that once the Christ child was born God invited outsiders to come and witness the miracle, the majesty, the mystery. For sure the in breaking of God in the presence of the baby was for those who had been waiting. And the in breaking of God in the presence of the baby was for those who had no idea who had just entered this world. Jesus came, offering salvation, forgiveness, hope, and roots for all. Those in the faith. Those considered outsiders. Those who had been waiting. Those who had no idea about the promised Savior.

A couple weeks before Christmas my grandmother, my only living grandparent, turned 95. This number is a milestone for sure to have reached! My grandmother has also had cancer three different times in her life, and buried her beloved husband after he lived with early onset

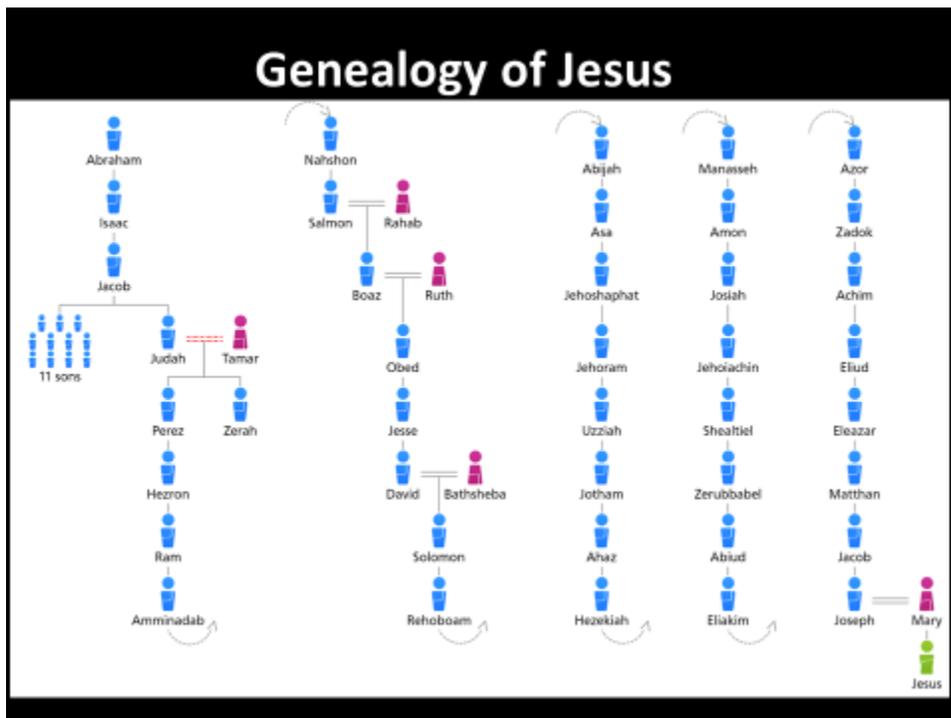
Alzheimer's. 95 is a milestone, one my grandmother never thought she would ever reach after cancer journeys, and after recognizing that both of her parents as well as all of her grandparents died before they were 80. Roots and a future.

I recently visited with my grandma while I was in Ohio. We talked about roots. We talked about things that happened in her life that she anticipated, predicted, and things that were surprises. I visited with my mom who is nearing 70. She spoke of her mother, my grandmother, engaged in this process of dying. My mother spoke of her grandmother, my great-grandmother, and told stories that I had never heard before. Stories of how God moved in predictable and steady ways. And ways that God moved in ways that brought about utter surprises. Roots and a future.

The first two chapters of Matthew are devoted to establishing roots, identity, context, as well as casting a much larger vision that will be expounded upon throughout the entire gospel. Matthew accomplishes this all by beginning his book with the genealogy of Jesus. Turn with me to Matthew chapter 1. As we turn there I invite you to hold in your one open hand this story of the Magi and the Shepherds... outsiders invited to celebrate the Christ child. And this other hand now hold Jesus' genealogy.

Now as we turn there I'm going to assume that there is not anyone here who could stand up and recite from memory these seventeen verse. Anyone? I don't know about your experience, but these verses never showed up on a Bible memory list during my childhood. Matthew chooses to begin his book by listing a genealogy of 42 generations! Now genealogies might not interest all of us, nor do many of us have one for our own families. However they were extremely important in the days of Jesus. They told a story. They showed a way of belonging. They provided roots as well as a future. Thanks to the Logos biblical computer software, here is a

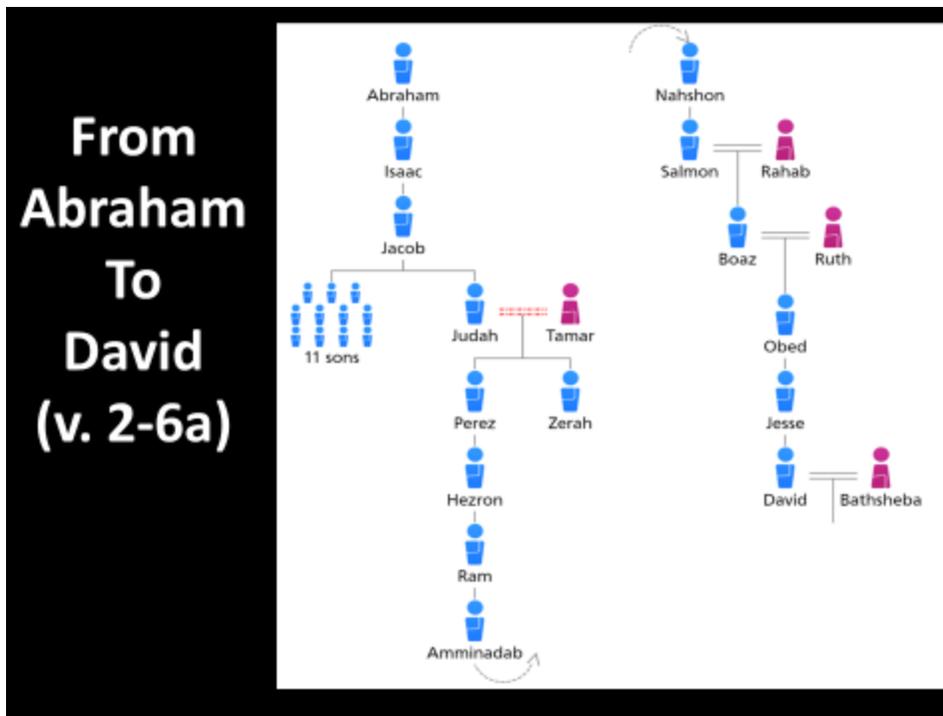
picture of the entire genealogy.



I will admit it is

overwhelming to try to digest as a whole. And don't worry, I don't plan to tell the story of every person in this list!

Verse seventeen of chapter one tells us that this image could be broken down into three smaller units – “Abraham to David,” “David to the Babylonian Exile,” and “Exile to the Messiah.” This morning I want to offer several reflections.



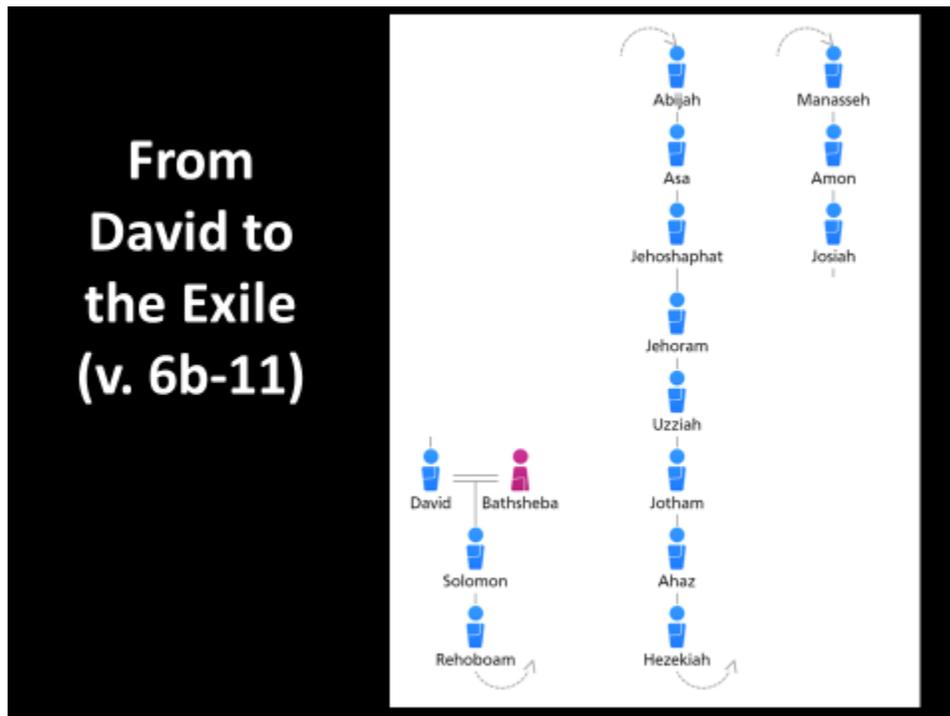
In this first section

we find 14 generations and a variety of names we probably recognize. What is significant to note in this section is that there are four women included in the genealogy. It was **not** the normal practice to include women in Jewish genealogies. I think if we could have projected which women might have been included from these generations, we might have readily offered some of the matriarchs such as Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, or Rachel. We might have listed women who were considered insiders, part of the group.

Instead the four women named were considered for one reason or another, “outsiders,” just like the shepherds and the Magi. The women are Tamar, Rehab, Ruth, and Bathsheba who is named as the wife of Uriah. Not only are these *women* but they are not Jewish. Tamar and Rehab were Canaanites, Ruth a Moabite, and Bathsheba was the wife of a Hittite. Furthermore one seduced her father-in-law, one is a well-known prostitute, one took unusual and suspicious steps to pursue the man she eventually married, and one was involved in adultery. *These* are the four

women included in Jesus' genealogy? These are the women considered "outsiders" that God used to bring about God's perfect plan through imperfect people.

In case you are thinking that it was only the women who were imperfect, don't forget that in this list is also Jacob who cheated his brother out of his birthright through lying and deceit. And of course there is David, a man after God's heart, and yet still fully human and not above sin, deceit, adultery, and even murder. Imperfect people being given roots and a future.



The next

fourteen generations also included some interesting characters in the family tree. What's important to note here is that this is a list of kings, showcasing that Jesus is coming through a line of royalty. However, not all were righteous or followers of God. For example, "Rehoboam son of Solomon loses most of David's gains through arrogance and greed"ⁱⁱ and Amon followed in the ways of his father and did evil in the eyes of the Lord. Imperfect people in God's perfect plan, outsiders being given roots and a future.

One hand magi and shepherds, the other hand the genealogy of Jesus. My question to you this morning is are you able to see yourself in both of these groups? On the one hand we too are invited as outsiders, saved by God's grace and redemption, to come and witness the birth of the Christ child, the coming of the Light, and to bow down in worship. Then we too are asked to return and to share the Good News of the arrival of the new King of Kings.

On the other hand are you able to find yourself in Jesus' genealogy? The list is not filled with those who are perfect, hold the right pedigree, and presents the right level of faith. Instead it is a list of individuals just like you and me. Imperfect people being used by God. Imperfect people being given roots, a story, a place to belong, an opportunity to be part of something much, much larger than themselves. Outsiders who are made insiders and given a role in carrying out the mission and vision of the kingdom of God. Are you able to see this list as part of your family history?

So, what might this all mean on this Sunday when we celebrate epiphany, celebrate the light of the world? I share four of my prayers for us:

- It is my prayer that the Light of Christ might shine in the darkness and illuminate the ways we in the church are deeming others as outsiders, and not extending the welcome to come and worship the newborn king.
- It is my prayer that the Light of Christ might shine in the darkness and reveal to each of us the ways we are given roots and a story and a place to belong in the family of God, the ones that join others as being redeemed through the life and resurrection of Jesus.
- It is my prayer that the Light of Christ might shine in the darkness and beckon us to be grounded in our roots as well as excited for our futures, both being found and gifted by God.
- It is my prayer on this Epiphany Sunday that the Light of Christ may penetrate the darkness and proclaim a new truth to a world that is hurting. That the light might grant hope for those despairing, peace for those caught in the midst of wars, comfort for those overwhelmed by grief, and joy, unspeakable joy, unshakeable joy, for all who recognize that the Christ child has come. Salvation is made possible for all – insiders and outsiders. All. For all created in God's own image. This is the good news of Christmas. This is the good news of Epiphany. This is the good news that embraces us and propels us to share with all.

So, this morning I proclaim thanks be to God for roots. Thanks be to God for a future. Thanks be to God for using imperfect people in God's perfect plan. Thanks be to God for inviting you and you and you and me to come and bow down and worship the Christ child, the Light of the World.

Hallelujah!

ⁱ Richard Gardner, *Believers Church Bible Commentary; Matthew* (Herald Press: Scottsdale, PA), 50.

ⁱⁱ Stanley Hauerwas, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew* (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, MI), 32-33.