

Crooked Lines

Joshua 2:1-21; 6:22-25

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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The gospel according to Matthew, chapter one, verse one:

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham:

² Abraham was the father of Isaac,
Isaac the father of Jacob,
Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,
³ Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, **whose mother was Tamar,**
Perez the father of Hezron,
Hezron the father of Ram,
⁴ Ram the father of Amminadab,
Amminadab the father of Nahshon,
Nahshon the father of Salmon,
⁵ Salmon the father of Boaz, **whose mother was Rahab,**
Boaz the father of Obed, **whose mother was Ruth,**
Obed the father of Jesse,
⁶ and Jesse the father of King David...

And so it goes for another ten verses and twenty nine often hard-to-pronounce names until we get to Jesus.

I'm guessing that right about now you're thinking, "that's about as uninteresting an introduction to a sermon as it is a book of the bible."

In my HarperCollins Study Bible, the entire first page of the New Testament is a genealogy.

If you number yourself among the “easily distracted,” or if you tend to get weary of lists, or if your name is *not* Kevin Neufeldt (our resident genealogist!), you might be tempted to give up on your New Testament reading project before you got past the first page!

We’ve arrived at our final sermon in the 2020 Faith Questions series.

As you’ve heard, the topic this morning is the story of Rahab, but the question I received went beyond her story itself. The person who asked was also curious about what a prostitute’s place in the genealogy of Jesus has to teach us.

So, an important question to ask at the outset: What is a genealogy? Is it a dry list of names, a mechanical recording of names, dates, family connections?

Perhaps this is how we think about genealogies (if we think about them at all), but it was not how people in the ancient world viewed them.

For them, genealogies were a hugely important way of telling a story and of locating someone within a people and within in a broader context of meaning.

How you tell a story matters.

This is as true for two kids narrating a playground conflict as it is in the world of global politics.

This week, David Brooks wrote a piece in the *New York Times* about the upcoming American election. In it, he reflected upon how successful presidential candidates are, in the end, storytellers and meaning-makers.

Listen to what he says:

In 2016 Donald Trump told a successful myth: The coastal elites are greedy, stupid people who have mismanaged the country, undermined our values and changed the face of our society. This was not an original myth; it’s been around since at least the populist revolts of the 1890s. But it’s a powerful us vs. them worldview, which resonates with a lot of people.

Trump's followers don't merely believe that myth. They inhabit it. It shapes how they see the world, how they put people into this category or that category...

Bernie Sanders is also telling a successful myth: The corporate and Wall Street elites are rapacious monsters who hoard the nation's wealth and oppress working families. This is not an original myth, either. It's been around since the class-conflict agitators of 1848. It is also a very compelling us vs. them worldview that resonates with a lot of people.

When you're inside the Sanders myth, you see the world through the Bernie lens.¹

According to Brooks, you can get have all your facts straight, you can present a rational, dispassionate argument for why you're the right person to lead at this particular time and place, you can be competent and careful and brilliantly suited for the task. But if you can't tell a good story, if you can't narrate things in a way that conveys meaning way, you won't win an election.

On one level, this is depressing. Do you mean to tell me that facts matter less than emotions? That in the end we just want someone who will make us feel something? That the truth of the matter matters less than what can be packaged in a compelling way?

This doesn't exactly flatter us as citizens or as human beings.

But I think Brooks is absolutely right. This is how we are wired as human beings. We crave a story that doesn't just dispense data but helps us to make meaning in the context of a broader narrative.

How you tell a story matters.

So, how does Matthew tell Jesus' story in his genealogy?

Well, there are many things we could say about the symbolism and the number of names that were included, but in the interests of time and the topic of the day, I want to focus on only one.

Matthew's genealogy includes women.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/20/opinion/bernie-sanders-win-2020.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

This would have been highly unusual in the world of ancient genealogies. Luke doesn't do this in his genealogy, for example.

And not only does Matthew include women, he includes women of a very particular sort.

He does not mention esteemed Jewish matriarchs like Rebekah or Sarah. The women he gives a place of prominence in Jesus' story are probably not who we would expect.

There are four that I want to focus on today. Mary is also mentioned, but her story and the scandal it involved are well-known, so I want to give air time to the others.

Rahab.

We've heard her story this morning. It's a fascinating one on so many levels with many questions.

Why does Joshua send spies to Jericho when the land has already been promised to the people of Israel?

Why does it specifically mention that they set out from Shittim? If we rewind to Numbers 25, we see that this was where Israel first began to violate the commandments to avoid idolatry and sexual immorality with foreign women.

It was at Shittim that commentators say that Israel "first began to play the harlot" and be unfaithful to their God. The story that unfolds is a fairly gruesome scene that I won't elaborate on here.

But it is from this place—the place where Israelite men began to have be unfaithful with Moabite women—that the spies set out to Jericho and immediately find themselves in the house of a foreign woman, a prostitute.

Many commentators try to explain away the awkwardness here by saying that "the house of Rahab" might have just been an inn, but it seems strange for the narrator to specifically mention that Rahab was a prostitute then. Sometimes, the most obvious explanation is the appropriate one.

And yet, Rahab extends hospitality and protection to these foreign spies. She hides them when the king's men come looking for them and sends them off on a wild goose chase to allow the spies safe passage over the wall. She pleads to be spared along with her family when the army comes back in exchange for saving the spies from her king.

The cynic would say that Rahab was doing a simple calculation. She had heard word of Israelite army's exploits and that they were advancing on her city. So, she makes a deal to save her own skin and that of her family.

But Rahab also gives eloquent testimony to the God of Israel. *I know that God has given you this land. We've heard about how your God has led you out of slavery in Egypt. The Lord your God is God in heaven above and on earth below.*

The first confession of God's sovereignty and purposes in the book of Joshua thus comes from the mouth of a foreign woman, and a prostitute.

And because of this, Rahab takes her place in the story of Christ. Her faith and her deeds are praised in Hebrews where she is included in the roll call of the saints. She is also mentioned in the book of James as an example faith in word and in deed.

What about the other three women?

Tamar was the daughter-in-law of Judah and we find her story in Genesis 38. Most likely, she was an indigenous Canaanite woman.

Her husband, Judah's son, is struck down by the Lord for his wickedness and she finds herself a childless widow.

Custom of the time, strange as it sounds to our ears, would have been for her brother-in-law to do his duty to provide her with offspring. But he wasn't interested, evidently.

Tamar's situation would have been desperate. A woman with no husband and no children. This would have been precarious place to find oneself in the ancient world.

So, she takes matters into her own hands. She dresses up like a prostitute and seduces Judah (her father-in-law) without him knowing her identity so that she'll get pregnant. She takes his cord and staff as a pledge for the goat that he promises her in exchange for sexual services.

Tamar gets pregnant. Judah is incensed that his daughter-in-law is pregnant out of wedlock and orders her to be burned to death.

And then, the moment of brilliant irony when Tamar produces Judah's cord and staff and says, "This is the man whose child I am pregnant with."

Judah's hypocrisy (among other things) is exposed and Tamar's place in the family is secured.

Again, it is an utterly bizarre story to our ears. But this is the story of Tamar.

Ruth.

During the time of the judges, a famine sends a family from Judah into the country of Moab. The sons of Naomi and Elimelek marry Moabite women, one of whom is Ruth.

Elimilek and both of his sons die in Moab and Naomi is left with two foreign daughters-in-law. One decides to stay in Moab, but Ruth, refuses to leave Naomi's side and follows her back to Bethlehem.

To make a long story short, Naomi and Ruth end up engineering a set of circumstances to get Ruth married to an Israelite man named Boaz. And another foreign woman enters the story that would lead to Jesus.

The wife of Uriah (Bathsheba)

And then we have perhaps the most well-known story of them all, which is of Bathsheba, the woman that David saw bathing on the roof and took as his own, deliberately orchestrating the death of her husband along the way.

She isn't named in the genealogy—she is referred to as Solomon's mother who "had been Uriah's wife." (Uriah was a Hittite, incidentally, so there's another connection to "foreigners.")

Some commentators say that Bathsheba isn't named because she was an "adulteress." This seems unlikely to me, particularly when Rahab and Tamar *are* named despite the unflattering shades of their stories.

I wonder if Bathsheba is described as "Uriah's wife" at least partly to remind people of David's sin in taking the wife of another man.

Given the power dynamics at play it would probably be more accurate to describe what David did with Bathsheba as rape or at the very least sexually exploitative and coercive behaviour than “adultery.” Nobody says no to the king, after all.

Bathsheba would go on to be taken as one of David’s wives and would then give birth to the second most famous of Israel’s kings (Solomon) who would himself be a complicated piece of Israel’s story, full of sin and greed and exploitation and moments of faithfulness along the way.

So, in sum, the four women we have in Jesus’ genealogy:

- a Canaanite prostitute who exhibited the hospitality and theological orthodoxy commanded of the people of Israel, and who played a crucial role in an important moment of Israel’s history
- a marginalized and threatened indigenous Canaanite woman who pretended to be a prostitute to trick her father-in-law into caring for her and her offspring
- another foreign woman who wasn’t supposed to be married to an Israelite, but who exhibits a level of fidelity to her mother-in-law that would not have been expected, and finds her place in Israel’s story
- the victim of sexual misconduct from an Israelite king, who then kills the Gentile husband of woman he had just exploited in order to cover up his crimes.

These are the four women that Matthew chooses to include in Jesus’ genealogy (again, remembering that you simply don’t include women in any genealogies!).

All in all, this is perhaps not the greatest sales job by Matthew. Ordinarily, you would want to present the royal king in David’s line as having a squeaky-clean family tree, full of impressive figures.

You would probably want to keep the family skeletons firmly locked up in the closet.

But this is how Matthew tells the story.

Because the story of Jesus can’t be told, apparently, without pointing out that his family tree is populated by the poor, the misfits, widows, those deemed unimportant, unknown, “sinful.”

How you tell a story matters.

The Roman Catholic priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley once famously said that “God draws straight with crooked lines.”

The line from Abraham to Jesus is a crooked one.

It has messy stories full of sin and sexual exploitation and surprising twists and turns. The “wrong” sorts of people are always showing up.

It’s a story where those who might expect dishonour and shame are given special mention, where those who would never expect to be included are held up as examples of faith.

It’s a story that includes people whose behaviour is at times bizarre, at times abhorrent, at times inspiring and courageous, at times sad and predictable, and at times surprisingly faithful.

It’s a story that, unlike most stories of the time, included women. And the story of Jesus would continue to include women in surprising and inspiring ways.

Jesus would hold up women as examples of faith (Mark 7:24-30), heal them (Mat. 9:21-23), raise their sons from the dead (Luke 7:11-17), defend them (John 8:1-11), praise their devotion (Mat. 26:1-13), have theological conversations with them (John 4:1-26).

It was women who were front and center as Jesus hung on the cross (John 19:25-26) and it was women who were first entrusted with the earth-shaking news of the resurrection (Luke 24:1-12).

All of this, it has to be said, would have been unusual, even scandalous at the time. This simply wasn’t how you told a story at that time—at least not if you wanted it to be believed or taken seriously. Yet Jesus insisted that women were central to God’s story.

God writes straight with crooked lines.

This is good news.

It is good news on a weekend when many are reeling from the reports that Jean Vanier, the much beloved founder of the L’Arche community, was involved in sexually exploitative relationships with at least six women over the course of over three decades.

This is devastating news for many people, myself included. I know it is particularly hard for those with direct connections with the L'Arche community here in Lethbridge. It seems unimaginable that the man who spoke and wrote and modeled Christ so faithfully over long years could have done these things.

Does this invalidate his example in L'Arche over half a century or more? What about all the Jean Vanier books in my study, books that I've underlined in, quotes that I've used in sermons and articles?

How do we reconcile the faithful example of Christ that so many saw in him with the reports coming out of his behaviour toward these women in the L'Arche community?

It's extremely difficult.

What can we say except that God writes straight with crooked lines?

This is good news for each one of us. None of our stories are straight lines. We all have skeletons in our closet, things we have done, things we have left undone, things of which we are not proud.

There is sin and sadness and failure and unfaithfulness in all of our stories.

There are also things that have been done *to us*, things that should never have been done, trust that was betrayed, humanity not honoured.

This is who we are as human beings. None of this excuses sin or ignores the deep pain it causes. It simply names the truth.

And yet God uses us as part of the story he is telling in and through and for the world. There is no story too painful, too insignificant, too scandalous or inconvenient that God cannot incorporate into the story of salvation—yours, mine, and the world's.

God writes straight with crooked lines.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

