Underdogs and Outsiders

Matthew 1:1-16

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In 1745, two brothers, Samuel and Alexander, set out from Belfast, Ireland to North America on a pirate ship named Kouli Kan. The brothers were servants, with no money, so they paid for their passage to the New World by indenturing themselves for four years. When the ship docked in Philadelphia, their indentures were purchased by local land owners. For four years Samuel and Alexander worked for the men who owned their labor. Then, when they were free, they tried farming their own “wheat patch” in central Pennsylvania for a while, but they were driven out by skirmishes in the French and Indian War. So, Samuel and Alexander migrated southward, along the Shenandoah Valley, settling finally in Orange County, North Carolina. There they acquired land and they acquired several enslaved persons. They became known as solid citizens of the county. Their last name is variously recorded – Torrington, Torringtine, Torrentin, Torrentine. Eventually most of their descendants settled on the spelling I use today, though we are definitely not of one mind about the appropriate pronunciation of our shared name.

I am of the eighth generation, descended from that first Alexander, who was the father of Samuel, who was the father of Archelaus (don’t you love these old names?). Archelaus’s son was my great-great grandfather Wilson Ellis Turrentine. Wilson’s son John Alfred Arrington Turrentine was a brilliant, eccentric, and utterly unreliable person, who deserted my great-grandmother, Dora Roark, in order to run off and help to build the Panama Canal, or maybe so he could escape to California and find a more interesting wife. He never returned, leaving her destitute. Their son Frank was my grandfather. Frank’s only child Charles was my father. And then there are my three siblings and me. Eight generations.

I am not descended from kings, or queens, or dukes. I come from hard-working servant-class men, who married hard-working women. In each generation those women bore ten or twelve children and still helped to manage the family farm. Together these ancestors pulled themselves up by their boot straps and became solid citizens. Land owners. Enslavers of other human beings, though we don’t talk about that part so much. I also come from a brilliant, eccentric, self-taught engineer, who spoke seven languages, kept a diary in Arabic, and ran off from all responsibility. I come from the son broken by that desertion, who turned to alcohol to mend his brokenness. I was not raised to be genteel, to aspire to great heights, to put on airs (as my grandmother would say). No, I was raised to be hard-working and hyper-responsible, always on the lookout against any cracks that might suggest weakness.

The stories we tell of our ancestors are not about them; they are about us. They root us in time and place, in a culture, in a family that is like all other families in some ways and is very particular in others. That is why the Gospel of Matthew begins with Jesus’ family tree. I am not going to read these seventeen verses to you, because they would absolutely put you to sleep. But I will share the highlights.

These are Jesus’ ancestors, Matthew says: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (whose name was changed by God to “Israel”). These names make sense to us. These men were famous, if not always virtuous. Then the list takes an unexpected turn. We might think Jesus to be descended from Jacob’s beloved son Joseph, whose story we know. Joseph saved all the people Israel and Egypt from famine. But no, Matthew says that Jesus’ ancestor was Joseph’s brother, Judah. Judah is the one who suggested selling Joseph into slavery in Egypt. Judah married a Canaanite woman and then impregnated his daughter-in-law Tamar. That Judah. Well, every family must have a black sheep, I suppose.

From Judah and Tamar we get four more generations of descendants we have never heard of, and never will again, until we get to Salmon and Rahab (more on her in a moment). Their son was Boaz. Wait, we’ve heard of Boaz. He’s the virtuous land owner who rescued and then married the Moabite immigrant, Ruth. Here they both are in Jesus’ family tree. Ruth and Boaz’s son Obed was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David, the great king who unified the fractious nation of Israel and made Jerusalem its political and religious capital. David – this is the kind of name we expect in the family tree of the Messiah. God had promised that a king of David’s lineage would be on the throne of Israel forever. The people have been waiting for a King like David. This list of ancestors is making sense now.

But how do we get from David to Jesus? David and Bathsheba have a son whose name we all recognize: Solomon, the great and wise king of Israel, the last king of Israel, before the nation fell into terrible disrepair. From Solomon there are thirteen unpronounceable descendants to get us to the time of the Babylonian exile, and then thirteen more after the exile till we get to Joseph of Nazareth, the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus the Messiah.

There it is, Jesus’ family tree, with some famous names and some infamous names, and – interestingly – the names of four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba. All the other names in this list are men. Why – out of all the other women who were assuredly in Jesus’ family tree, too – why would this gospel call out these particular women? Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba. Let’s hear a little bit of their stories.

Tamar is a Canaanite woman, married to Judah’s oldest son Er. When Er dies, according to Jewish law, she is given to the next oldest brother so that she can conceive a child by him, who will then receive Er’s share of the inheritance, and who will provide for Tamar in her old age. But this brother fails in his duty, and he dies, too. Judah then promises Tamar his youngest son, when he comes of age, but eventually Tamar knows that Judah is never going to fulfill that promise. She will be destitute, abandoned, with no way to survive. It is the rankest injustice, and a huge violation of Jewish law. So, one day, Tamar does the only thing she can think to do: She dresses up like a prostitute, with lots of veils, and sits at the city gate. When Judah, the father-in-law who has cheated her, walks by, he approaches her and engages her services. They agree on the price – he will pay her a young goat. Somehow, throughout their tryst he doesn’t recognize her. She is just some veiled prostitute to him. And, true to his character, he doesn’t pay her the goat that he owes her. Tamar gets Judah’s personal seal as promise that he will pay the debt. Judah doesn’t pay, of course. Later, when it becomes known that Tamar is pregnant, Judah says he will burn her alive for her sin. That is, until Tamar shows up with Judah’s personal seal, proving that that Judah, himself, is the father of her child. The Bible calls out Judah as a hypocrite in this story. It doesn’t criticize Tamar, even though her methods are scandalous, because she is seeking justice where there is no justice.

Rahab is next. This story happens several hundred years later, when the people of Israel are ready to enter the Promised Land, to claim it as their own. Joshua is their commander. He sends a couple of inept, almost comical spies into Jericho to scout out the city. Rather than gathering intelligence, they immediately head for the red-light district, and spend the evening with the prostitute Rahab. Somehow the king of Jericho hears that there are spies in the city, so he sends a search party. Rahab hides the spies on her roof. When the search party shows up, Rahab tells them, “Yes, I had some visitors tonight, but I didn’t know who they were, they went that-a-way.” The search party heads outside the gates to search for the spies, and Rahab works out a deal with the spies to save her own family in the coming attack, in exchange for saving theirs in this emergency. Then she lets down a rope from her window and the spies climb down it to report back to Joshua. The Bible doesn’t condemn Rahab for her profession. In fact, she comes off looking pretty good in this story, while the spies look like bungling fools. Rahab is the prostitute with a heart of gold, who strikes a deal that saves her whole family in the coming battle.

Ruth is next, and we know her story. She is the despised foreigner, the Moabite, who displays faithful loyalty to her mother-in-law Naomi. The two of them are in desperate straits, two widows with a little piece of land and no way to support themselves, so Ruth proposes marriage to the much older Boaz, offering herself to save the mother-in-law to whom she has sworn allegiance.

Bathsheba is last in the list. She is the wife of Uriah, the Hittite, who is off fighting in the Israelite army. One day, Bathsheba is up on her roof bathing, and King David sees her from his palace window. She is another man’s wife, but David wants her for himself, so he sends word for her to come to him. We don’t know what Bathsheba thought of this, but we do know that no one says no to the king. Bathsheba becomes pregnant from their encounter, so David nervously calls Uriah back from the war front, to try to make it look like Uriah is the father of the child, but Uriah refuses to sleep in the comfort of his own home when the army is sleeping on the battlefield. So, David sends him back to war and conspires to have him killed in battle. There are many incidents in David’s life story that are not flattering. This is probably his worst sin, the one for which the Prophet Nathan says he stands accused before God. Bathsheba becomes David’s next wife, and eventually the mother of his heir, King Solomon. She becomes the Queen Mother of Israel.

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We are going to spend this spring reading the Gospel of Matthew, which is all about Christian ethics – How should we behave as Christians? What does God expect of us? What does God value? This gospel is full of memorable parables and aphorisms that we all know by heart. And yet it begins, not with a memorable story but with this unpronounceable list of Jesus’ ancestors, a list that is centered on men but includes these four scrappy women, who – surprisingly – carried the hope of the nation of Israel. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba – not one of them was an Israelite. They were underdogs and outsiders. And they were scandalous – a woman who pretended to be a prostitute, a woman who was a prostitute, a despised foreigner who offered herself in marriage to a wealthy older man, a woman who slept with the king when he demanded it. These stories all point out the hypocrisy of powerful people. These women were vulnerable to the power and authority of the men around them, yet they commanded the stage. They used what they had to demand justice, to negotiate for survival, to find a way forward, to triumph in the end.

The stories we tell about our ancestors are not about them, they are about us. The Gospel of Matthew says that Jesus descends from the whole story of the people of Israel, not just from its famous and virtuous role models. His family tree includes its fair share of black sheep and plenty of people who are simply unknown. And right here in this long list of male ancestors are these four women – women who were righteous in God’s eyes, even though they were scandalous in their own communities; women whose stories called out the hypocrisy of powerful people. As we study the Gospel of Matthew this spring, we can expect Jesus to call out hypocrisy and to scandalize the people around him as he demonstrates God’s true righteousness.

May God grant us the courage to be a little scandalous, too.

Amen