

## Luke 2:18-20 “Surprise!”

Here’s another reason I think it’s important to be a part of a community of faith rather than just trying to trudge through Christianity on your own. Some folks get the idea that all you have to do to understand the Christian faith is just pick up a Bible, read it cover to cover with no commentary, no historical context, and no understanding of ancient Middle-Eastern culture. And don’t get me wrong, some people are able to read it cover to cover and be just fine. But the first stumbling block that people usually run into when they try to read the Bible cover to cover is the genealogies or the “begats” as some people call them. So-and-so begat so-and-so and so on and so on. Pages of people whose names are hard to pronounce and whose names only appear once in the Bible. People ask, “What does this have to do with anything?” With a few exceptions, we don’t really pay much attention to genealogies in modern day American culture. If you’re into it, you’re *really* into it. If not, well ... you’re not. But to ancient people, genealogies had a *lot* of meaning. Ancestors were seen as a vital part of a person’s story. Your ancestry helps define who you are.

So who was Jesus? “The son of God, Jesse. Did you not pay attention in Sunday School when you were a kid?” Yes I did. But “Son of God” is a Sunday School answer. It’s sort of like the pastor who gathered the kids for children’s moment one Sunday and said, “Okay kids. I’m thinking of something small and furry. It can be red or gray. It’s got a bushy tail and gathers nuts for the winter. What am I thinking about?” After an awkward silence, one of the kids says, “Preacher, I know the right answer is probably, ‘Jesus’ but it sure sounds like you’re talking about a squirrel.” I want to look at the question, “Who was Jesus?” in a little different light. What do all these “begats” tell us about what the gospel writers wanted their readers to know about the *humanity* of Jesus?

Of the four gospels, only two give us an account of Jesus’ birth. And both include pretty extensive genealogies. But they aren’t the same.

Well, that's not entirely true. Both of them agree that Jesus was a descendant of Abraham and Sarah. But aren't *all* God's chosen people, right? That's an important part of Jewish identity. Through Abraham and Sarah, all nations of the world will be blessed, so naturally Jesus is going to be a descendant of Abraham. The other similarity is that Jesus was from the house of King David. That would definitely catch the reader's attention because that was a part of the prophets' message that inspired the hopes, dreams, and desires of God's people. A.) Jesus is part of a royal heritage which makes him a legit candidate for "Messiahship" and B.) David's reign represents the golden age of Israel's influence on the world stage, and since the expectation of the Messiah was to get Israel back on the world stage, then sure ... it makes sense that Jesus is of the house of David.

After that, the genealogies go in different directions. Luke lists Jesus' genealogy between his baptism at the River Jordan and the temptation in the wilderness. It starts in the present and goes backwards. And Luke doesn't stop at Abraham and Sarah, he goes all the way back to Adam the original "Son of God." Maybe this hints that since Jesus is a son of Adam, he's a new beginning for the human race. Just as Adam bore the image of God as the first human, Jesus will reflect the image of God in a similar way. "Adam 2.0" if you will. Which goes along with what the voice from heaven said at Jesus' baptism. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Maybe that's why Luke's genealogy is listed after the baptism. Just as "Son of David" prepares us to expect Jesus to be like the greatest King of Israel; just as "Son of Abraham" prepares us to expect Jesus to be a blessing for all people of all nations; so then "Son of God" sets us up to expect Jesus to model true humanity.

Matthew's version is the first thing we read in his gospel. It starts from the past and works its way forward. Here's the big surprise in Matthew's genealogy ... he includes five *women*! That just didn't happen in ancient Middle Eastern genealogies. But check out the women he included in the lineup. Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba and Mary.

Let me give you a little background on these women. Tamar once posed as a prostitute so she could bear the son of Judah. I don't want to spend too much on Tamar's past because that story has more complications and twists than most soap operas. Rahab is often referred to as, "Rahab the Harlot." And she was. So I'll just stop there. Then there's Bathsheba, who King David stalked and seduced after sending her husband out on a suicide mission. Finally there's Mary who claimed to be pregnant without the help of her husband-to-be Joseph. What do they all have in common? Their stories include ... *controversy*. In other words, these are *not* the sort of women that you'd expect to see in an ancient Middle Eastern genealogy, especially when you're trying to highlight a person's pedigree as it relates to their credentials to sit on the throne of the new and improved, global, awe-inspiring, "make Israel great again" Kingdom of God.

But maybe that's Matthew's point! Maybe he's trying to say, "Jesus' story isn't that pristine." He's part of the story of the Gentiles as well as the Jews. There are some messy, broken families in this list. The list includes noble people, farmers, kings, priests, paupers, heroes, and folks from all different areas of life. He's not entering into the world on top where grace trickles down, he's entering into the world from the humble bottom where grace rises from the grass roots up.

But Luke picks up on this too, right? Matthew is the "wise men from the East" gospel, but Luke is the "shepherd gospel." You don't get any farther away from any throne room of any kingdom than shepherds. They lived outdoors in "fields where they lay," right? A lot of times, shepherds were the youngest sons of farmers who didn't stand a chance to inherit the family farm, so they just went out and tended the sheep. They didn't settle down and have wives or kids because they weren't suitable for marriage. And yet they had front-row seats to welcome the "good news of great joy for all people." They, along with Mary and Joseph, were the salt-of-the-earth people who were all visited by angels. They were the dirt poor.

And yet, the poor, according to the prophets before Jesus, would have a special place in God's Reign. Under God's reign, the prosperous would be obligated to be generous to the poor and let them glean from their fields. And those who exploited the poor? Proverbs says they would *not* prosper. But those who were good to the poor would be blessed.

So knowing this, let's ask the question again. Who was Jesus? Son of God? Yes. Here's what surprises people though ... and here's what you discover when you look at what a lot of us think are these boring genealogies with all their "begats." Yes, Jesus was the son of God ... but he was also a son of the Earth ... and when I say, "earth" I'm talking about the ones who were closest to and often covered with the dirt on which the earth is covered. When Jesus declared who he was in his own hometown synagogue ... when he laid out his mission statement, he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to ...?" The poor. Now he could have said, "all." He could have made this an "all lives matter" sort of thing, but he was specific. He named names. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the *poor*. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the *blind*, to let the *oppressed* go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he lived this out too. The poor were a central part of his ministry. In his parables, Jesus talked about a Kingdom where God cared for the poor and confronted the rich who refused to show compassion to the poor. When he said, "The poor will always be among you," he was echoing Deuteronomy 15:4 which says, "There *should be no poor* among you," which reinforces this Kingdom principle that goes back to the lesson of the very first creation account in Genesis: "There is enough in God's world for everyone."

And yet ... Today the majority of the world lives in poverty. A billion of the world's seven billion people scrape by on about \$1.25 a day, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. The folks who are the shepherds in the fields by today's standards. Many who, like the shepherds, are living without a roof and struggling to survive. This is a

part of Jesus' story. And this is a part of *our* story too. I'd say most of us, if we looked back in *our* genealogies, would find some of the same things that we find in Jesus' family tree. Some royalty. Some shepherds ... or at least those who can be compared to the shepherds of Jesus' day on the socio-economic ladder. Some ... controversial events and people. But no matter where we came from, and no matter where we are today, the message of the gospel is clear, and it echoes the words of the 146<sup>th</sup> Psalm: In God's Reign, "The Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. The Lord's reign will be forever, your God, O Zion, for *all* generations. Praise the Lord!"