

# The Sign of Bethlehem

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Matthew 1:1-18, Micah 5:2, Isaiah 11:1-3

Rev. Richard Haney  
Fairfield Presbyterian Church

## INTRODUCTION

Visiting NC always reminds me that the South starts at the NC—VA border. MD and DC and N. VA all seem fast-paced and northern to me and VA is a pleasant Mid-Atlantic bridge to the South. But in NC the accents broaden and the iced tea is always sweet... Of all America's regions the South seems the most reluctant to let go of the past. \*\*True southerners always ask the same questions when they meet somebody for the first time. *"Son, who is your dad, who is your your mom? And who are your people?"* That is, *"where do you come from? What is your background? Tell me about your past."* Flannery O' Connor once complained that people from the north *"are not from anywhere."*

That's why grandparents are so important. They tell us *who we are* and *where we come from*. They can tell us about the branches and twigs of our family trees, about who was a **shining star** and who was one of the **black sheep**. And we better listen to grandma while we can before those stories are lost to faded memories or the storytellers pass on to glory.

But sadly, in a technological society, there is nothing for our ancestors to teach us. We don't listen to old people because technology makes old people ignorant. *"My five year old grandchild knows more about computers than I'll ever know,"* says the grandparent. Technology gives us the impression that children know more about how to get on in the world than their parents do. After all, no one over forty can program a VCR—I mean a DVD player (I mean a Blu-Ray player)!

But MATTHEW the gospel writer did not write in a technological society nor did he come from the modern world. For him, the past was prelude to the present. So when he told the story of the Messiah-King, he started at the beginning. And the beginning is a **genealogy**, a birth record, a family tree.

*"A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham..."* I'd like you not to think of this genealogy simply as a long list of unpronounceable names. Rather, imagine that each name represents a **story**. And the 40 or so names make up a **history**. And that history is not so different than yours and mine. It has highlights and low points. Shining **stars** and black **sheep**.

The list is divided into three sets of 14 generations. From **Abraham** to **David**. From **David** to the **Exile** (all the kings of Judah) and from the **Exile** to the **Advent** of **Jesus**. Ordinarily a family tree is traced from oldest son to oldest son to oldest son and so on. Not in this family... We have **Isaac** instead of *Ishmael*, **Jacob** instead of *Esau*, **Judah** instead of *Reuben* or *Simeon* or *Levi*, **Perez** instead of *Er*, *Onan* or *Shelah*.. So strange to fly in the face of tradition!

Also odd, in the first set of 14 generations, **four women** are listed.

Surprisingly, **Tamar**, **Rahab**, **Ruth** and **Bathsheba** are included by Matthew. Tamar was the daughter-in-law of Judah and she tricked her father-in-law into keeping his promises to her. Rahab, the prostitute, is best known for assisting Joshua and Caleb when they were spying on Canaan.

Ruth is the least questionable when it comes to reputation--but Ruth was a foreigner—a Moabite--descended from the incestuous Lot. Finally, Bathsheba is listed but Matthew blushes to name her directly. He calls her Uriah's wife, indicating that she was not the lawful wife of David.

The fact that women are mentioned at all is noteworthy. Usually a family tree is traced exclusively through the fathers. The only reasonable reason for including women in a birth record is if they will ensure the purity of the line. But these ladies do not fit the bill. All four women are non-Jews!

Matthew, despite his obvious emphasis on the Messiah's *Jewishness*, makes an effort to teach us that the line that leads from Abraham to Jesus was again and again intersected by Gentile blood. King David himself had a Canaanite great-great-great grandmother (**Tamar**), a Jerichoite great-great grandmother (**Rahab**), a Moabite great grandmother (**Ruth**) and a Hittite wife (**Bathsheba**). Matthew wants the church to know that from the start, God's work has been interracial and that God is concerned about all the ethnic peoples.

And beyond the Gentile connection, the stories of these women involve unusual or scandalous marriages. Except for Ruth, who among us cite Tamar, Rahab and Bathsheba as examples of moral uprightness? Okay, you might tell your kids about Rahab—how she helped Joshua and Caleb. But Tamar & Bathsheba?

We usually think of the OT matriarchs as Sarah, Rebekeh, Rachel and Leah but they are not in Matthew's list. Matthew gives the church four new matriarchs, all tainted by Gentile blood and/or scandal. They pave the way for the mother of the Messiah to be a controversial figure as well.

This is no ordinary family tree. This is not what you expect to find among the ancestors of a great king. But Matthew is doing more than reporting like a court historian. In these stories Matthew is preaching the **grace** of God—the deep, wide and wonderful mercy of God. And yes, even **Mary**, the last lady in the list, does not escape the hint of scandal. She was betrothed but not married when she found that she was expecting a child. Joseph even tried to break off the marriage plans.

The story of the Messiah is a strange one whose path has twists and turns. One whose family has plenty of **black sheep**. I have highlighted the *ladies* in this birth record. But if we had time, I could tell you stories from the middle group of 14 generations. Stories about the *kings* who followed David. Only a handful were upright, faithful role models.

If I had a son I might not name him after any of these latter day Jewish kings with the exception of two--**Hezekiah** and **Josiah**. The others were greedy, ambitious, inept and faithless. But they all were ancestors of Jesus--the Messiah king.

You know what **symbol** I find most compelling in the Messiah's family tree? Can you guess what sign reminds us that God had a plan from the beginning to keep his promises and bless us through a baby? For me it is the symbol of a place. It is the **sign of Bethlehem**. In the family tree history **Bethlehem** is prominent...

**Bethlehem** is as improbable a place as any would choose to be the birthplace of a king. But it serves as the birthplace of two kings. **Jesus** is born there because **David** was born there. David is the key figure in the birth record. He was Israel's greatest king. And God promised David through Nathan the prophet that "*David's kingdom and throne would be established forever*" (2 Samuel 8:16).

That promise seemed to be in jeopardy when the monarchy ended with the Babylonian exile. But God was working his purpose out even then. **Isaiah**, speaking over 300 years before the exile, prophesied, "*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a branch will bear fruit.*" Who is this figure linked to Jesse and called "*a branch*"? About 30 years after Isaiah, another prophet (**Micah**) speaks of **Bethlehem**--though it is tiny and obscure, a ruler will come forth from that place. Jesus is the Davidic heir and he arises from the same place as David—so also it is the town of Ruth and Boaz.

**Bethlehem** (*house of bread*) was a place prepared for a royal birth!

2000 years from Abraham to Jesus
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1000 years from David to Jesus
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The sign of Bethlehem reminds us God prepared the world for his Son's coming to earth. Matthew's genealogy tells the reader-in-the-know that GOD keeps his promises; the one to Abraham "*that through Abraham all families on earth would be blessed*" and the one to David "*that his throne would be established forever.*"

Yes, this genealogy is like none other. God has His own ways. He is not in the business of meeting our expectations. But that is not because He disappoints us. Rather, He exceeds our expectations and confounds our earthly wisdom and shatters our tiny, predictable thoughts about divinity. And this pattern will continue: The mother of the Messiah is not a regal queen but an unmarried **virgin**, the Savior's birth is announced not only by heavenly **angels** but also by peasant **shepherds**, the Messiah-King is laid not in a royal crib but in a lowly **manger**--but you have to wait to hear about those signs. Today we seek to understand the sign of Bethlehem and the story of an improbable family tree.

The sign of Bethlehem tells us about God the Promise Keeper and points to the *earthy* stories of Jesus' *earthly* ancestors. If God passes over the first born to build an ancestral line for his son, we must not presume or rely on traditional ways of **us** being accorded **status**. On the other hand, if there is room for *Tamar* and *Bathsheba* in the story there is room for you and me...

To be a Christian means to adopt a peculiar history in which we are forced to name ancestors whom we wish we did not know. The great-great...grandmother of Jesus was **Tamar**. Really? Yes, if we hadn't had Tamar we couldn't have had Jesus.

I believe we learn to see what's ahead when we first look back into the past and see where we have come from. When we listen to our ancestors, whose stories (**tradition**) can show us the right path. When we see where Jesus came from and what kind of King He is—the *Messiah-King* and the *Shepherd-King*.

**Tradition.** What is tradition? Consider Jaroslav Pelikan's definitions.

*Tradition* is the *living* faith of the *dead*.

*Traditionalism*, on the other hand, is the *dead* faith of the *living*.

Do you know the difference? How important is **tradition** for **Fairfield** as we seek to follow the Spirit and map out the future? How deadly is **traditionalism** as we seek to follow the Spirit and map out the future?

Mapping out the future is not simply a matter of planning. It IS listening to God as we pray and read the Scriptures together. It is remembering and honoring and preserving our heritage as God's covenant people.

It is trusting that God has plans for us and mission for us and a bright future for us. It is not being discouraged by bumps in the road—even big bumps in the road.

It is not being bitter at loss and disappointment.

It is refusing to condemn those who disappoint us and those who leave our fellowship to look for greener pastures.

But it also is proactively reclaiming the discouraged brother or inactive sister and warmly welcoming new folks. It is being willing to try new ways and trust new leaders. It is not being anxious or paralyzed by trying something new that does not work the first time.

It is faith looking forward as HOPE... **Hope**, our watchword for today!

Do you know the 7 deadly words of traditionalism?

We've never done it that way before.

During ADVENT as you hear familiar stories about God sending a messiah-- watch for both the **new** and the **old**. The Advent narrative has tradition and continuity embedded deep inside. And it has plenty of the strange and wonderful and unexpected woven into the story's fabric. This is how God works. He does not disdain the past nor forget his promises. He does not contradict what He has said and done before. But He also does **new** things. He works in ways that confound our predictable expectations and exceed our tiny hopes.

**He fulfills...** God's sovereignty—Messiah's coming not accidental but planned

The sign of Bethlehem shows us particularly the outworking of God's covenant promises. He who has begun a good work in us (our ancestors) is working to bring it to completion. We belong to the Tradition of Ruth, David, Jesus, & Bethlehem.

Finally, the sign of Bethlehem shows us again how God uses what is weak and small and lowly for beautiful and noble purposes. Isn't that hopeful? Doesn't that assure us that there's a place for us in God's kingdom?

The bottom line of history is that Jesus, son of David, and son of Abraham **is** God who has come in human flesh! And when He came He arrived in Bethlehem.

*“But you, O Bethlehem Ephratha, though you are the least of the clans of Judah, out of you will come a ruler...”*

LET US PRAY!

*O come, O come, Em-man-u-el  
Shall ransom captive Is-ra-el*

*That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear*

*Rejoice, Rejoice,  
Em-man-uel  
Shall come to Thee, O Is-ra-el. Amen.*