

Your Role in His Story: *Matthew 1:1-17*

Plymouth Park, November 25, 2007, "The Christmas Story, pt 1"

It happens a lot around the Holiday season. Families gather together as people return to their hometowns. Families tell stories, stories of their children and their grandchildren, stories of all that has gone on the previous year, but also stories from the past, of those who are no longer with them. Stories that remind each family member who they are and where they came from. Perhaps you told some stories like this a few days ago with your family. I'm sure there are more stories to come over the next month.

Often these stories are accompanied by trips...trips to the family graveyard. There the grandchildren are introduced to Great Grandma and Grandpa, who died before they were ever born. Over there is Uncle Charlie who died in infancy, and Aunt Julie who just died last year. Your parents tear up when they see their own Father's grave, and Grandma tears up more when she sees her husband's tombstone, and the blank one beside his that has been reserved for her.

Your cousin who has been working on the family genealogy makes a few grave rubbings, takes some pictures, and records the information given as family members reflect on the stories of their loved ones who have died.

It's always a strange experience visiting the family graveyard. Here are the resting places of men and women you owe your life to, quite literally. Men and women whom you've never met, yet their stories profoundly shaped who you are, where you would live, who would be your parents. You can learn a lot about yourself by visiting the family graveyard.

Matthew knows this. As he begins his story about Jesus, before he ever tells us about Mary and Joseph, or Bethlehem, or the angels, or the wise men, he takes us to Jesus' family graveyard.

When Luke tells this story, he begins with Jesus' great aunt Elizabeth, Uncle Zechariah, and cousin John.

When John tells this story, he begins before time even began, when the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Mark skips this part of the story all-together.

But Matthew...Matthew begins the story of Jesus in the family graveyard, an ancient graveyard that goes all the way back to father of many nations, Abraham.

When we first step foot in Jesus' family graveyard, that's the first tombstone we see. It's at the center of the yard, covered with mold, cracked, yet still prominent.

“Here lies Abraham”...the inscription, “The father of Isaac, and of many nations...the wandering Aramean.” Abraham’s tombstone stands at the center of the yard, for he stands at the center of the history of all the world’s major religions. Though there is much difference between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the one common denominator of all three is that Abraham is seen as a father of their faith.

And rightfully so. Abraham was chosen by God, handpicked by the Almighty to be the one through whom God’s own son would be born. He is an exemplar to us all of what the faithful life looks like, for he left home and country and followed God to a strange land, simply because God asked him to do so.

Yet, he wasn’t always as faithful as the legend declares. He once risked his wife’s life to save his own...he often lied to get himself out of trouble...and he didn’t believe his wife would have a child until he held that child in his arms. He often lived with fear, doubting God’s promises. Yet, still, Abraham was chosen by God, and it is through Abraham that a new people dedicated to the Lord was born. As Matthew takes us on a tour of Jesus’ family graveyard, it is fitting and proper that we begin the tour at Abraham’s tombstone.

Next to Abraham, rests his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob, whose name meant “cheater” and who’s life lived up to his name. Buried somewhere in this graveyard is Abraham’s wife Sara, his daughter-in-law Rebecca, and his granddaughter-in-law Rachel, but you won’t find any grave markers. Women were often ignored in family histories, never considered that important. Yet, next to Jacob’s headstone, we notice something strange.

Judah’s grave is there, and rightfully so, for he was one of 12 sons of Jacob, yet his story is not a pleasant story you tell in the children’s Sunday school class. Judah’s story was marked by lies and adultery. One day Judah was walking along the road when he saw a prostitute, and he gave into temptation. That woman soon became pregnant...and only after the fact did he realize that the prostitute was in fact his own daughter-in-law, who tricked her Father-in-Law into lying with her so that she would become pregnant.

As we look at Judah’s tombstone, recalling his troubled past, we notice that right next to his is a small tombstone. The dirt and mold is obscuring the name, so we wipe it off, only to reveal the words “Here lies Tamar,” Judah’s daughter-in-law. Sarah’s grave isn’t marked, nor is Rebecca’s or Rachel’s. But there lies Tamar, her grave marked in Jesus’ family cemetery.

It is then that we realize this is a strange graveyard, for sure. Most families would suppress the stories and names of their female ancestors, especially those with troubled and embarrassing pasts like Tamar. It’s a proud thing to be descended from Abraham. But to be the descendant of someone like Tamar...this is not the story you tell with pride around the Thanksgiving table.

We don't even tell this story in our Sunday school classes or from our pulpits. Yet there she lies, Tamar...the liar, the deceiver, the adulterer—in Jesus' family graveyard.

Just down from Tamar's grave, over in the dark corner, is another small tombstone, the grave of another woman who also had a shady past. At least Tamar only pretended to be a prostitute...this woman really was one. A citizen of the city of Jericho, she was known in the town for her immoral life.

Yet, it was to her house that two faithful Israelite spies came to hide, and she chose to protect them, risking her own life, when the police of Jericho came looking for them. In return for her kindness, the Israelite spies promised to save her from the coming destruction of Jericho. But did her small act of mercy reconcile the life of immorality she had lived? I guess it doesn't matter, for there is her tombstone in Jesus' family graveyard, with the words, "Here lies Rahab, the prostitute."

Just around the corner from Rahab's grave, also in the shadows, is another small tombstone, small like the size of the book in the Hebrew Bible that carries the name of the woman buried here. We often remember this woman as a great woman of faith and dedication. I've never known a baby girl named Tamar or Rahab, but I've known a few named after this one. Yet in course of history, she really didn't do anything amazing. She never risked her life to save Israelite spies. All she did was move from her home to the home of her mother-in-law Naomi, who had just lost her husband and all her children. There in her new home, she cared for Naomi, and met a rich, Jewish man named Boaz who fell in love with her...and the rest is a beautiful love story.

Yet, we often forget in telling her story that she was a Moabite, which to the Israelites meant she was an unclean, pagan half-breed. A good Jew like Boaz should not be seen associating with someone like this woman. Yet he did, he married her, and they had a son from their mixed marriage. Now there in the shadows of Jesus' family graveyard is her tombstone inscribed with the words, "Here lies Ruth, the Moabite."

Next to Ruth and Boaz's graves is the grave of their son Obed, and the grave of their grandson Jesse. And there next to Jesse's grave stands the tallest, most prominent, lavish grave of them all, the grave of David the great king.

David was a true hero of the people of Israel, and any Jew would be proud to be descended from someone like David. He was a man after God's own heart, the great king of Israel who led his people to victory and prominence over all the kingdoms of the world.

Yet, any scholar of David knows that his story is not as clean as we would like it. Though his ancestors would try to cover up his misdeeds, as we look through this

graveyard there's no avoiding this great king's shady past. For right on the other side of the grave of his son Solomon, stands the tombstone of Solomon's mother.

Solomon's mother, though she was the Queen of Israel, never could fully bask in the honor of this title, for she came to her position in a most devious way. After David saw her bathing on her roof while her husband was at war, he called for her, and she laid with the King and became pregnant. And in one of the greatest political cover-ups of all time, she worked with David to make sure her husband Uriah would be killed in battle, and she could finally marry David and have their baby together.

We know her as Bathsheba, but the mason who carved her gravestone did not name her as such, but carved the words, "Here lies the wife of Uriah", forever telling of her adultery, her lies and her bloodstained hands. There's no avoiding this grave in the graveyard of Jesus' family.

We're just over halfway through this family graveyard and we already have enough stories to make anyone want to change their last name. As we glance over the rest of the yard we see the stones of other men, kings of Israel, some good like Zerubbabel, who led the Israelites from captivity and began to rebuild the temple of the Lord, and there are some graves of wicked kings like Manasseh, who led his people to idolatry, to greater acts of wickedness than all the nations before Israel, even setting his own son on fire.

There are enough stories here to fill up the holiday season for generations.

Yet the story that is repeated year after year around the holiday dinner table, without fail, is the story of the last gravestone we come to, one more grave attributed to a woman.

Her grave is very humble, yet beautiful. There are two stories told of the woman who lies in this grave, two versions of her life.

In the first, she is nothing but a young, teenage, Jewish girl who's wedding plans are interrupted when she becomes pregnant. Some who tell her story believe her baby was Joseph's, her soon-to-be husband, conceived out of wedlock. Some think she was running around on him, her sin exposed by the pregnancy.

Yet the story this young woman told was quiet a different take on the events. Some thought she crafted the most unbelievable cover-up story in history, while countless others believe her story to be true and they place their faith on it.

As she tells the story, one night an angel appeared to her, before she ever married Joseph. The angel told her that, even though she was still a virgin, she

had been impregnated by the Holy Spirit and the child will be named Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins.”

For some reason, Joseph believed her version of the story, and he took his fiancé to his hometown of Bethlehem where they gave birth to their miracle baby.

Matthew prefers this woman’s story as well, and as he shows us this final grave, with the words, “Here lies Mary”, we can read the inscription below her name, “Humble servant of God, Blessed among women, Mother of our Lord.”

This is quiet a family graveyard Matthew shares with us, filled with stories that would make one proud, but many that would make one shudder. Yet, like it or not, proud of it or not—this is Jesus’ family graveyard. These are his scandalous ancestors. This is where he came from.

And as we leave Jesus’ family graveyard, we begin to think about the graveyards of our families. For we too have some graves like these in our lives, some stories from the past that are too shameful to speak of, but are forever a part of our memory, a part of who we are.

Stories of choices our family made, before we were ever born. Choices that impacted our parents, and in turn impacted us. Buried in our family graveyard are alcoholics, abusers, adulators, and criminals, their stories forever changing our own, often for the worse. Also buried here are words that have been said to us in anger, things done to us in hatred, stories of betrayal from the people we loved the most.

There are also some graves from things we have done. Some choices in our past that we have made that make the sins of our ancestors seem like misdemeanors. Some of these choices are only freshly buried, and some of them still lie on the surface.

Though we would like to be completely proud of who we are and where we came from, when we look through our graveyards, we see that there is much to be ashamed of. With a graveyard like this in our lives, how could we ever amount to anything?

That’s when Matthew interrupts our thoughts, and shows us one more grave in Jesus’ family graveyard. It’s way in the back; we completely missed it earlier. As we wipe of the dust, our jaws drop. We recognize the name...it is our name.

What are we doing in Jesus’ family graveyard? Certainly someone like us has no place in Jesus’ family?

That’s when Matthew points over the hill, into the garden below, where we see a tomb hewn out of the rock. As we look at this tomb, we find no grave marker. In

fact, the stone that is to cover this tomb has been rolled away and the tomb is empty.

“This is Jesus’ tomb,” Matthew tells us. “But he is not here,” we reply. Matthew smiles: “He’s risen. He has risen indeed!”

And then we realize why we’re in Jesus’ graveyard, and why everyone else is here too. For it’s not what we have done, or what has been done to us, that qualifies us to play an important part in the story of Jesus on this earth. It is not our pedigree or life-achievements that makes us worthy to be counted a member of Jesus’ family.

We are a part of Jesus’ family because of his empty, unmarked grave. It needs no marker, for his very name tells it all. As the angel told Joseph, “You will name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

And if we’ve been baptized into Christ, we too have been buried into Jesus’ family graveyard, our old person dying away as we rise with Jesus into new life.

These graves we’ve looked at, these people buried here in Jesus’ family graveyard are here, not because of what they have done, but because of who Jesus is. Their sins have been whipped away; their future re-written; their past lives buried, so that they may be resurrected with Christ, and we with them.

Because Jesus’ grave is empty, we can be made new.
 Because Jesus’ grave is empty, we can be a part of His family.
 Because Jesus’ grave is empty, we are now children of God.
 Because Jesus’ grave is empty, our graves will one day be empty as we rise to meet Jesus, and all our family members in heaven.

Though we often skip over Matthew’s introduction to his gospel, though we get bogged down in the names and the begets and begots of Jesus’ genealogy, it is here, in this tour of Jesus’ family graveyard, that Matthew shares with us the Gospel.

It seems strange that Matthew would share these stories when trying to tell us about Jesus. One would think he would want to clean it up a little bit, showing Jesus to be a man of great pedigree. That’s what king Herod did, who ruled when Christ was born. History claims that Herod had all the genealogies of his family destroyed, concealing his past so no one could learn of the shady stories of his ancestors.

Not Matthew. He tells the stories, gives us the names of some of the most embarrassing Israelites in all of history. And he does this for our sake. He does this to let us know that no matter who we are, no matter what we’ve done, no matter what has been done to us—we can be a part of God’s story.

Wven though your life may be far from a storybook life. Even if the stories that could be told of you might bring shame to your family—you are still a part of God's salvation history.

Like our grandmothers Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba and Mary—we have been chosen to play an important part in God's story. Like our grandfathers Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Judah, God can use our broken past to fashion a glorious future. Though our sins may be great, God's grace is greater.

We are a part of God's family. We are His children. Jesus is our brother. This is our story. This is who we are. May we all live up to our family name.

Prayer:

Father, we thank you for bringing salvation into our world through a little baby, and for having that baby born into a family like this. As we look at Jesus' family history, it gives us hope to know that even people like us, with our troubled pasts, our mistakes, our embarrassing stories—even people like us can play an important role in your story. Thank you for including us in this story, and may we be faithful to your calling on our lives, that we too may birth salvation into this world. Amen.