

December 30, 2018
Bootleggers & Bag Men
Annette Hill Briggs
Matthew 1:1-17

1 *An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

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

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, ⁷ and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, ⁸ and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, ⁹ and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ¹⁰ and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, ¹¹ and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

¹² *And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³ and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴ and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵ and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.*

¹⁷ *So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.*

Your bulletin cover [a blank family tree] is a worksheet. You can write in a name. But see if you can remember a story to go with it – maybe a story you’re not sure you want a stranger to know about your kinfolks.

In the 1920’s, one of my great-great uncles was so depressed, the whole family organized a schedule to make sure he was never alone. Then one fall, they were all at one farm to work an apple harvest and realized nobody had eyes on him. They went searching and

two of the boys found him in an orchard with a paring knife. In front of them he cut his own throat and bled to death. My grandma was a child at the farm that day, told me the story – the same grandma who hid her whiskey in the linen closet, even after she'd moved into assisted living. Two cousins from my own generation, boys I grew up with, have also committed suicide. One just this year. That's only my mother's people.

Carl's Uncle Jack went to federal prison in the 1970's, convicted for acting as bagman for a Mississippi sheriff. Another set of Briggs were small time bootleggers who fled Arkansas for Oklahoma, where one of the sisters was murdered. These are my children's people: the suicidally depressed; secret alcoholics; bootleggers and bagmen. Along with a few soldiers. No more than a handful of devout church people. Many, many rent farmers. Housekeepers and shopkeepers, beauty operators (a term I love!), coal miners. But no teachers, preachers, doctors, lawyers, nurses, professionals, politicians, not a single college graduate on either side before 1986. Just the plainest and poorest and hardworking-est of people, including the bootleggers, bagmen, suicides, and secret alcoholics. Anybody else have a testimony?

All of it is why I am so deeply comforted that Matthew's account of the salvation of us all does not begin with the story of an *eight-pound, six-ounce, newborn, sweet little baby Jesus*. He did not come to us from thin air, Friends, but through a long line of the liars and crooks who were his kinfolk – just like our kinfolk – on this earth.

Let's pray: *For the great courage it takes to know and tell the truth of from whom we've come, we pray, O God. For the even greater courage necessary to keep loving ourselves and those other people – the corruption and the grace – we pray as well. Amen.*

I read you a poem on Christmas Eve by Carol Penner. Here is part of another by her:

*We love you in the manger, Jesus.
Your little hands and feet,
your soft breathing,
your eyes closed in sleep.
You may be a revolutionary,
but we like ours in diapers.
Forgive us, Lord,
for preferring a Saviour who can't talk;
Who has no words of judgment;
Whose chubby arms can't flip tables
Whose baby feet aren't marching to Jerusalem.*

No gospel writer goes on so long as Matthew about the baby Jesus – except his story doesn't start there. Abraham and David – that's Matthew's beginning, the Founding Fathers of Judaism. Abraham – dirty old man. (Remember Hagar? Remember him

passing his wife off as his sister?) David – the rapist-murdering king. In between them, Jacob the swindler; Rahab the prostitute; Solomon the colonizing slave-maker. And Manasseh – son of Hezekiah, grandson of Ahaz, king of Judah, whom the Bible describes as *more evil in the sight of God than all the nations God destroyed in the sight of Israel*.

They are all here, these men. Along with Rahab, Matthew mentions Tamar, Ruth, and Bathsheba – interesting because women don't belong in Jewish genealogy. But they show up in Jesus'. None of these ancestors are blood kin to baby Jesus, remember. They are Joseph's family, and Joseph was Jesus' adopted father, at least as Matthew would have us believe. Adoption counts the same as blood for Jewish families, then and now. It must – otherwise Jews would be extinct.

So the pre-incarnate Christ looked across humanity to choose a family. As one Princeton preaching professor describes it, he selected *a household of melodious healing, youthful courage, abusive power, rape, murder, incest and fratricide – a despicable history, making Jesus kin to those who need his forgiveness most*. "Most"? Do some need it more than the rest?

Years ago my ten-year-old neighbor visited me after his trip to the country of his father's birth. *How did you like it?* I asked. He replied, *This world is a dirty, disgusting place*. I expect that seems true to someone who's only ever lived in a tidy subdivision half a mile east of here. But don't you wonder, Friends, if from God's perspective the difference between here and there, between the best and worst of us, is *infinitesimal*? That when deciding where to land as a newborn human being, God could pretty much just spin the bottle.

Pretending there's no whiskey in my grandma's closet doesn't mean there isn't. Or that it has nothing to do with me. It just means that I still don't know all I might about why this world hurts me so, about why I'm sometimes mean or sometimes angry, or sometimes so very much afraid. Without knowing how broken and disgraced we are, Friends, we cannot know how very much God loved us. And not knowing how much God loves us, we have not yet taken in that God chose to save us instead of letting our messed-up nature take its course.

It hurts to know. It's embarrassing to know. It's necessary to know. It's true repentance to know. It's grace discovered and freedom found, to know how much God loves us in our brokenness and disgrace. To know ever more precisely into what circumstance God chose to come, to become like us.

To know is hard, hard work – the work of prayer and trust. And we don't ever have to do this work. But I do want to point out that this work of knowing from where and whom we come is where the gospel of Jesus Christ begins. Crooks and liars. Saints and sinners. Secret alcoholics. Suicides. Bootleggers. Bagmen. Saints. And sinners.

Before Jesus says a word, we know so much about him, don't we? We know he comes from folks pretty much like ours, into a world as messed up as this one – and wasn't one bit surprised. After all, this is the world and we are the folks he chose in the first place.

Would you pray with me?