

LENT 2
Matthew 1:1-17
March 16, 2011
Central, Anchorage

EMBRACE THE SCANDAL

Matthew's gospel account begins with a genealogy—telling the “genesis” of Jesus, the Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham. Then follows the names: “Abraham generated Isaac, Isaac generated Jacob,” etc., until we get to “Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, the one called Christ.” We might not be surprised that Mary is named, after all, she is the mother of Jesus, the one called Christ. But it is out of the ordinary, in a biblical genealogy to name women. It was a very patriarchal society. Your official name always included the name of your father, e.g., Simon bar Jonah—Simon son of Jonah. Genealogies always were traced from father to son, father to son. Then, how unusual indeed that four times, in the genealogy of Jesus, Matthew mentions the mother. First, “Judah generated Perez and Zerah by Tamar.” Next, “Salmon generated Boaz by Rahab.” Then, “Boaz generated Obed by Ruth.” Soon, “David generated Solomon by the wife of Uriah.” Before Matthew mentions Mary, the mother of Jesus, he includes four other women in the account of the “genesis” of Jesus. Why? Why these women?

In one way or another, with each woman and the child she bore, there is a hint of scandal. For the story of Tamar, read Genesis 38. Her first husband, Er, the firstborn son of Judah, died childless. According to law and custom, Tamar was then given in marriage to Jacob's next son, Onan. This custom is called Levirate marriage, or brother-in-law marriage. The practice sees to it that a woman who becomes a widow still has a secure place in the family and tribe. Also, her firstborn son by the second husband will be considered the son of the first husband, though he is now dead. Onan didn't like that. He didn't want to share the family inheritance with his now deceased brother. So, he refused to get Tamar pregnant. Onan died. Judah held off on marrying Tamar to the third son. Some years later, after Judah's wife died, he went on trip. Tamar put off her widow's garments, veiled her face, and went where Judah had gone. There, Judah assumed she was a prostitute and he paid her for sex. Now, she became pregnant. When the truth came out, you can well guess there was gossip about the scandal. But Judah acknowledged the truth and said, “She is the righteous one, since I did not give her in marriage to my son Shelah.”

What about Rahab? In Joshua 2, we find her living as a prostitute in Jericho. She takes initiative to help the people of Israel by protecting the Israelite spies and thus is instrumental in their conquering of the city.

The union of the Moabite woman Ruth with Boaz, accomplished through Ruth's initiative or seduction of Boaz, at the instruction of her mother-in-law Naomi, culminates the story of Ruth, who is King David's great-grandmother.

And finally, the wife of Uriah, i.e., Bathsheba. By referring to her as Uriah's wife, Matthew reminds us of the sordid affair when King David stole Uriah's lovely wife and had Uriah killed in battle.

Now we come to Joseph and Mary. Joseph gets word that Mary is pregnant. How could this be? The only logical explanation is that Mary has been unfaithful, has broken banns, committing adultery. What would Joseph do? According to law, Mary should be stoned to death. Harsh punishment would teach a lesson to others. Although Joseph is called a “righteous man”, he is unwilling to follow the strictures of the law. He resolves to do things quietly, to put Mary aside and also, at least for now, to put aside his own dreams of married life.

Like Joseph of long ago, the dreamer, who in Egypt saved the families of Israel, Mary’s husband, Joseph, is a dreamer. In a dream, he hears the message that Mary’s pregnancy is a gift from God, part of God’s strange doings. Just as God worked through Tamar, through Rahab and Ruth, and through Bathsheba the wife of Uriah the Hittite, so now God will do strange and marvelous things through Mary. She will bear a son. Joseph will name him *Jesus*, “for he will save his people.” When the boy is born, Joseph does name him, thus claiming him as his own son.

Joseph did not trip over the scandal of Mary’s pregnancy. He resolved to embrace the scandal. He heeds the angel’s message, “Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” Do not be afraid. Embrace the scandal, for God works in unexpected ways. God is full of surprises.

God, somehow, will work even through Jesus, the Messiah like no one expects the Messiah to be. This Messiah, a young babe, must flee with his parents to Egypt to escape Herod’s rage. Are we surprised, even scandalized, by this God who chooses weakness and humility, born of woman—unmarried Mary? The stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba are part of Jesus’ story. The family fleeing to Egypt and Herod’s massacre of the young boys of Bethlehem are part of Jesus’ story. The narrative of his birth already points us forward to the narrative of his death as a criminal upon a Roman cross.

Do not be afraid. Embrace the scandal.

To God Alone Be Glory.

Amen.