

“Christmas Part 1: Warts & All” based on Matthew 1:1-21

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione, December 18, 2022, Shelby Presbyterian Church

About 15 years ago, National Geographic launched an important new research project – the National Genographic Project. The aim was to build on the knowledge of human genetics by bringing in the curious public. This was the very first project of its kind, and it was a scientific endeavor. No names were attached to the samples, and you didn’t get a family tree. But at the end, you were given a randomized code to access your info, and it showed you the likely path of your ancestors, out of East Africa, the genetic Garden of Eden.

At the time, I was intrigued by this project as one of the curious public. Claire and I had just started dating, and I was reading a book called, “Mapping Human History” by Steve Olsen. The genetic markers in the study were not specific to any nation, but to people groups and regions. It did not, like the latest popular versions, attempt to give you a percentage breakdown of your ethnic heritage. It gave you only the areas of commonality with different people groups that helped determine the routes your ancestors may have taken.

On my mother’s side, the route was fairly classic – an Aryan route. Being German, the map showed her migration out of Africa, going out to India, up through the steps of Asia, and over into southeastern Germany. There were no big surprises here.

But on my father’s side, it really shined a light on the history of his Sicilian family. You see, there was a line going through Greece and the Alps into Italy from the north. But then, there were a couple of alternate routes – one from the heart of Africa that went up through the Sahara Desert, and one that spent a little extra time around the Syria-Palestine region.

In the end, what I learned was that a quarter of my genetic markers were held in common with populations in Sub-Saharan Africa and a quarter of my markers were in common with those of Jewish heritage. (Note: This is not a percentage of ethnic heritage, but genetic markers only.) What’s more, there was some Scandinavian there too. What it revealed about my father’s family was really a revelation of Sicily’s history – a history of conquerors, the conquered, and diversity.

Sicily was inhabited by people who likely came down from the Italian peninsula, but it had also been a colony of the Greek city of Athens, and then its own city-state. Then, it was part of the Roman Empire, until the Germanic Goths conquered it briefly, and then the Byzantine Empire reconquered the island for about 300 years. Eventually, the Byzantine general there rebelled against the empire and gave rule to Muslims from Tunisia in Africa. Under this empire the island then became a refuge for Jews from Europe, who escaped persecution on the mainland, and became bureaucrats in Muslim Sicily.

Then Normans sailed down and showed up. Of Viking descent, they came down from the northwest of France. They took over the island for nearly 200 years. Sicily was popular because it was a vital trade route that not only brought grain and olive oil from Africa to Rome, but produced these products, which were staples in the ancient diet. An island in the Mediterranean, it was a port to ships from the entire region.

Now, I'm not sure what I would find in my family tree in terms of individuals I'm related to, but in my DNA, what became clear, was that I'm a mutt. There were a bunch of different dynasties in Sicily, the conquered and the conquerors, and I'm the result. Some of that may have been nice loving families, but quite a lot of these unions producing children were probably not. Yet, all of this is present in my family tree in some manner.

It is possible I have ancestors who knew the great Greek mathematician from Syracuse called Archimedes. Perhaps even, others related to Augustine or Tertullian, some of my favorite theologians who were from Africa, places in modern day Tunisia. Most were probably Roman Catholic, while some were certainly Jewish, and others were probably Muslim.

With all our obsession today with family trees and websites like Ancestry.com or 23&me, I find that many people gloss over the genealogies in Scripture or even skip them. (I bet some of you at some point wish I had skipped them over this morning.) Yet, I didn't want to skip it. It wasn't in the lectionary, but I decided to put it in today's service because like my genetic maps and markers, there is history to be found here. It is a history that informs even the overall message Jesus brings, and ultimately, it carries important lessons for us today.

You see, it is commonly believed that Matthew was first written to a Jewish audience, to the early believers and converts in Judea and Galilee, who were mostly faithful to the one true God of Israel. Matthew is providing an account that is focused on continuity within that faith and critique of that faith's traditions.

And so, the first thing he does is give Jesus's origin story – to show that Jesus is legit – a child of David and Abraham. He is in the big family, and in the line of Kings. But then Matthew foreshadows the ministry of Jesus by highlighting five women. You see, one of the things I love about scripture in both the Old and New Testaments is that it is not like other histories of their day. Jewish histories held nothing back. The accounts we get in the two testaments show everything: Warts and all.

You see, one of the things that makes good history so hard, is that most of the ancients, in their official public stories, only told the narrative that made them look good. They deleted the things that might have made them look bad, whereas the official narrative of Jewish history only aims to make the Lord God look good. The people are always a huge mess, who need a lot of help.

You see, Judah was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, whose descendants made up the nation of Israel. Judah had three sons and the first woman mentioned, Tamar, married his eldest son, but this son was apparently "evil" and was struck down by the Lord and died. So, following customs of the day, he gave Tamar to be wife to his second son. This second son stood to inherit Judah's blessing for the first son, but if he had a son with Tamar, then that son would be considered his older brother's child and he would get it. So, Judah's second son engaged in some ancient birth control methods, and as the story goes, he was struck down by God for this.

It's interesting that the text makes clear that Judah's first two sons disobeyed God and died. They were the problem, but Judah interprets this as Tamar's fault, when the text clears her of any blame. Judah refuses to let her marry his third son, because he thinks Tamar is cursed, not

realizing his own sons were the problem. Tamar is basically abandoned. She is forced to do something drastic – she dresses as a prostitute – and at the city gates, where it is Judah who propositions her for sex.

He gets her pregnant. She gives birth to twins, and she proves that the sons are in fact Judah's children. From this son Perez we get to Jesus, but first we get to Salmon, who fathers a child with Rahab. Rahab was the Canaanite prostitute in Jericho, who hid two spies in her brothel. Rahab – a non-Israelite prostitute – expresses her faith in the Lord God and proves it by her hospitality to these spies and her deception. The Hebrew Scriptures do not indicate she married Salmon, but they do say that after Jericho was conquered, she remained in the land and lived there. Matthew connects her to Salmon, likely from some oral tradition. If he's trying to make Jesus look good, this probably shouldn't be in there.

In these accounts, Matthew foreshadows Jesus's ministry to women like Tamar and Rahab, who in the ancient world were forced into something they probably didn't want to do in order to survive. What's more, in Rahab, we see intermarriage with a local – a Canaanite woman. This is forbidden but not, as it is often interpreted, based their nationality. It's forbidden because God doesn't want the people falling into worship of these other gods.

She believes in the God of Israel and becomes part of the family, but it means Boaz, their son, is not fully Israelite, but half-Canaanite, and he marries Ruth. The book of Ruth tells us she is a Moabite, another one of those families considered to be enemies of Israel. But like Rahab, Ruth has chosen to be faithful to the Lord, and does so out of loyalty to her first husband's mother.

This means that Obed, the grandfather of the great King David, is only a quarter Israelite. Obed's mother and grandmother had been considered enemies of God's people. Yet by their faith in the Lord God of Israel, they become part of Israel's family. And then, in one of those stories that would have surely been deleted, had the Egyptians been writing this account, David seduces the wife of a mercenary soldier named Uriah, a Hittite, and so, this Bathsheba too may have been a Hittite, a foreigner. When she is with child, David tries to get Uriah to claim the child, but when he doesn't, David kills Uriah. That first baby dies, but nevertheless, David and Bathsheba then marry, and later she gives birth to Solomon. Hebrew scripture really does share the problems.

So, Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is in the lineage of Abraham and David, but in doing so, also makes clear that Jesus's command to go out to all nations is rooted in the very history of the people of Israel from whom he is descended.

Our Isaiah passage mentions King Ahaz, who was called evil and worshipped other gods. Yet, when God asks a question through Isaiah, he acts all pious, saying he didn't want to test God. God tells Jesus's ancestor that he will give a sign anyway – a young woman would have a child, and this child would be Emmanuel, proof of God's presence. In that moment, this would be a sign to Ahaz that life goes on – Ahaz will not matter. When life goes on, we see God with us.

But when the people return from exile, this passage began to point to the future more, and in Greek, the Hebrew word which can mean young woman, but also virgin, was translated to a Greek word that almost exclusively means virgin. They saw something spectacular in store and

it led to the first Christians seeing in Mary's story a parallel with the idea of a virgin would conceive. The prophecy of the ordinary to Ahaz, becomes to the extraordinary in the Messiah.

And so, we get to Joseph and the fifth woman mentioned – Mary – and that virgin birth. In the patriarchal society, and quite honestly even in ours today, Joseph would have been within his rights to divorce Mary for infidelity. He would have even been justified in shaming her, publicly accusing her. Recently, friends I know whose wives have cheated on them and left, have gotten a lot of sympathy announcing it on social media. It is understandable. Joseph could have understandably played this card. Yet Joseph, described as a just or righteous man, does not make himself the victim here, and he does not want Mary to be the victim of public shaming and disgrace. I'm sure she told him about the Angel and that the child was of the Holy Spirit. I'm sure he knew of the prophecy in Isaiah, but that's hard to believe.

But like how God would not let Ahaz mess up God's plans, so too, God sets Joseph straight, sending an angel to him. You can imagine that Joseph was afraid in this, but the angel says to name the child Jesus, for he will save his people from their sin. The name Jesus – or Yeshua in Aramaic and Yehoshua in Hebrew – means the Lord, YHWH saves.

The angel tells Joseph that this holy child named "Yahweh Saves" will save his people. Joseph takes on the incredible role of being step-father to God in human flesh. He knows he will save from sin, but he may not know the whole story – that being in human flesh, the eternal Son of God would die, executed with all the power of sin and death on a cross, only to defeat those powers by rising again so that by his life, death, and resurrection, all humanity might be freed from sin, and might share in the life of God, abundant and eternal.

My sisters and brothers, I am continually amazed by the story of scripture. The warts and all that are included flesh out a story of God's faithfulness to humanity, never giving up on us, but acting in never-ending, never-failing love for us. Consider what I explained about Jesus's family tree and what it actually means. Now consider your family tree.

If you get nothing else out of this, connect your family tree to Jesus's. There are probably some messed up individuals in your family tree as well. Maybe think of your church history and the messed up people who have sat in the pews with you. As in our current families and church families, lots of people have caused a lot of hurt, including ourselves who have caused a lot of hurt.

One of the biggest mistakes in our culture today is the common attitude toward history, that it is a good thing to cover up the warts and all the bad things, explain them away, smooth it over. We give the best story possible. This is common in the church, but happens in other religions, political parties a lot, and even happens with atheists, ideologies, and as many worldly identities as we can find.

Everyone tries to prove the purity of their side, their way of being. The bad actors are always in the other group. We're victims. The beauty of scripture is that it claims the bad actors, and it admits – this is who we are. Only God is good, and so the only biblical character without fault is Jesus. Any study of genealogy, like mine, will show you racial purity is lie, but so then, if we

study the people themselves, any other purity is also a lie. It is best we don't deceive ourselves about our own purity either.

Sisters and brothers, in this Christmas season, I hope you will hold on to this truth: That the reality of who we are is ugly, no matter which group we identify with. Yet, the God who made us is good and loving, and made us to be good and loving.

So then, let's get off our high horses, just as God humbled God's self. God came down to us to share in our weak and mortal nature as a baby. So as we gather for Christmas, or consider who we are going to choose to "be with" in this season, let's not expect our families to be ideologically identical. Let's not act as though our own interpretations of scripture or our own political and social beliefs are purest.

Likewise, if you're here because it's Christmas and have given up on church, because you know the sins and failures of people you identify with church, remember that no group is without its sins and failures. Every group tries to claim they are. Yet not even the family from which Jesus is descended was perfect.

And if you're here as a regular church goer, remember that we're not called to hide our flaws, but to tell the truth about our failures and strive to do better. The good news of Christmas is that God is with us – come down to be one of us – to share in our humanity, humbly, as a lowly child born in a cloud of suspicion. He is born in a family filled with failures and sins, desperation, and elitism, and yet, each and every one of you is called to know that no matter what, regardless of your past, your family's past, your church's past, there is always a future you can turn to and do better. Your God loves you unconditionally and calls all of us to be one family – a diverse and yes, sometimes messed up family – one family in Christ. Amen.