

Where did you come from? Who made you what you are today? What good things did you inherit? What trauma did you endure? A lot of who we are comes from how we were raised, what the community that surrounded us was. And what were the traditions, especially around the holidays.

I grew up in Berkley, Michigan, right down Woodward in the 11 mile and Woodward area. And I was blessed to grow up right next door to my grandparents. They had a plot of land next to their house that they gave my parents when my father was done serving in the army. I loved living next to Mae and Maynard Hardt, who I called gram and gramps for so many reasons.

Gramps was a republican and I was a democrat which made for exciting discussions. But my grandfather was also a racist. I didn't know a lot about racism at the time but I knew I didn't like it when he would use the N word around me.

In the summer we would sit on their porch and have chocolate ice cream and raspberries and help gram solve her crossword puzzles.

But at Christmas time, that's when the magic happened. Gramps would put up two Christmas trees in the living room. He was also the local Santa Claus for all the community events. And he would put lights all over his house. I know my dad tried to put up as many lights as his dad next door, but I don't remember it being as amazing as gramps.

On Christmas morning, we would gather at gram and gramps house early so that we could get the chairs before the cousins came. When they got there, they had to sit on the floor while we enjoyed our seats. One set of cousins were always the last ones to get there because they had to go to mass first, so we couldn't open presents until they arrived. Then chaos ensued as we all opened our gifts.

Grandma would sit in her chair with a big smile on her face and Grandpa would be sitting in "his chair" scowling because Grandma didn't want to unwrap her presents.

And because Grandma was from England, the best part of Christmas happened next. She would take the sausage rolls that she had made out of the oven and we

would all eat them with some egg nog to wash them down. To this day, when I bite into a sausage roll, it takes me back to my grandpa and grandma's house.

Then we would all go home and get ready to go to Pinckney to have dinner at my Great Grandparents house. They still had their English accents and I loved to hear them talk with those accents and play war with my great grandpa.

On my mother's side, I didn't know my grandfather very well. I think I met him twice. He was an alcoholic who would beat my uncles a lot. My mother had cut ties with him so my Aunts would sneak me over to his house so I could meet him. Rumor has it that he was involved in a murder of a Native American over a gambling debt and fled Salt Lake City and ran to the Upper Peninsula.

Do you have great memories of your ancestors? Or are their things in their lives you wish you either didn't know or wish that others would never find out about.

The stories, scriptures and traditions of the Christmas season have been passed down to us through the generations. Many of us enter this season with a swell of memories and emotions as vast as the cultural and religious rituals this holiday holds. Like a tapestry woven throughout time, the Christmas story weaves us in – to remember how God has shown up in the past, to continue the work of collective liberation, to behold the presence of God in flesh and bone.

As we read through the scriptures, a line from Mary's song of protest and praise that is our theme scripture for Advent. Its from Luke 1:48b-50.

“Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Almighty One have done great things for me, and Holy is God's name, God's Mercy is for those who fear him **from generation to generation.**”

The root word of “generation” is “gen” meaning “origin” or “birth.” So while we will take some time to look back on the past generations, we will also be called to action: what are we being called to generate or bring forth? What have your ancestors and those who have come before you passed on for you to continue? Who are the spiritual elders in your life, in your community who planted the seeds for the things that are now blooming? What seeds are you planting for the future

The Iroquois have a philosophy called “The Seventh Generation Principle” that emphasizes how seven generations after us will be affected by our current actions and decisions. This philosophy invites us to cultivate a sacred imagination for what will come, considering what will sustain and benefit the generations who come after us.

So our scripture for today is about generation after generation of Jesus genealogy. And if you noticed, it’s a lot of generations! Fourteen generations plus fourteen generations, plus fourteen generations makes 42 generations.

All too often we ignore the first 17 verses of Matthew because we see them as little more than a boring recitation of a bunch of names, a genealogy to be gotten through; a long intro if you will, before the real action beings.

But if we look closely, we will see the skillful way in which the storyteller prepares us for the scandal of Jesus’ birth. Quite unusually, this ancient genealogy contains the names of four women. There were lots and lots of women in the course of 42 generations that the Matthew could have mentioned. But he choose to mention only four women. Four very particular women.

The first of the forefathers mentioned is not, surprisingly, Abraham. Matthew could have mentioned Abraham’s wife Sarah, but instead chose to ignore Sarah, and tell us instead about Isaac, Jacob and Judah before mentioning the first of the four foremothers. Matthew never mentions Sarah, or Rebekah, or Rachel or Shelah, before he offers up Tamar for our consideration.

Matthew declines to continue to mention several more of Jesus’ foremothers before offering us Jesus’ foremother Rahab. And you guessed it, Matthew fails to mention other foremothers before offering us Ruth and then again Bathsheba.

So I think its important to look at why these women are mentioned when so many are not.

First Tamar. The mention of Tamar to a Jewish audience at the end of the first century would have had the effect the story teller was after. Tamar was a woman who was wrongfully denied motherhood by her husband and after he died, then her brother in law, Onan. They both refused to sleep with her, and according to their customs, that was immoral and illegal. So she is a widow twice over.

So, Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute and ends up sleeping with her father in law, Judah, the son of Jacob. She gets pregnant and when Judah realizes it, he tries to burn her at the stake. Just before the fires are lit, Tamar says, “Oh, and by the way the person by whom I am expecting this child is the owner of this ring and this rope and this piece of clothing.” Judah recognizes the items and repents. He takes Tamar into his harem where she has twins and one of them is named Perez who is listed as one of Jesus forefathers.

Why did Matthew want Tamar mentioned in the genealogy?

Our next woman is Rahab. Rahab has a reputation as a sex worker. She was an innkeeper in a house of ill repute, a Madame if you will. She lived in the red light district of Jericho. When Joshua sent his spies across the Jordan river into Jericho, Rahab entertained them. The spies would have been caught if Rahab had not helped them escape. The spies promised that when Joshua’s army moved into Jericho, they would protect Rahab because of her services. She was told to hang a red cloth; a red ribbon in her window so Joshua’s army would know not to kill anyone in her home. Rahab and all her family was saved. So Jesus lineage is traced back to a sex worker. Why did Matthew add her name to the genealogy?

Our next woman is Ruth. Ruth’s pledge to her mother-in-law Naomi is often read at weddings. Where you go, I will go. Your people shall be my people. But very few people ever read the third chapter of the Book of Ruth. Naomi’s husband and her two sons die. This family consists of a Jewish mother and her Moabite daughter-in-laws. They are vulnerable without any male protectors. One daughter in law returns to her father’s house. But Ruth clings to Naomi. Together they move back to Naomi’s homeland of Israel.

According to the law, Jews were required to leave a portion of their crop in the field so that the poor could glean enough to eat. So each day, Ruth goes out into the fields to glean enough grain to keep herself and Naomi alive. Eventually, Naomi realizes that the man who owns the fields is a distant relative of her dead husband. The man’s name is Boaz. According to law, Boaz could exercise his right to marry the widow of a kinsman. And so together Naomi and Ruth hatch a scheme to seduce Boaz.

In chapter three, the chapter nobody reads in church, it says that Ruth went down to the river and bathed herself until she was wondrously clean and put on her best dress and put on all the perfume she had and planned to go to the harvest celebration and she planned to seduce Boaz as the wine would be flowing freely. True to plan, Boaz drank so much that he fell asleep. In an old Hollywood movie this is the part where they would fade to black. But not in the Bible. In the Bible Ruth “uncovers Boaz’s feet. “ And the rest is history. Jesus lineage is traced back to a seductress. What is Matthew trying to tell us?

Bathsheba is next. We all know the story of how King David saw her bathing and called for her. She is in no position to turn down the king. David’s act is usually described as adultery, but in our day we classify it as rape. Bathsheba becomes pregnant, and King David tries to have her husband murdered. When her first child dies, Bathsheba, now Queen assists in securing the throne for her son Solomon and ultimately is listed in the lineage of Jesus. However, she carries the label adulteress which is not exactly how the story began.

Why does Matthew highlight the skeletons in the messianic closet? Matthew moves on to Mary, who will be the mother of Jesus.

He didn’t have to mention the four foremothers. He could have avoided the scandalous stories that their names conjured in the minds of his audience.

Take a look at the art on the front of your bulletin. It’s called “Genealogy of Christ” by Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman.

She says, “While creating this image, I spent a lot of time with the women mentioned in Jesus’ genealogy because I had a resounding echo of shame in my body that I had received from engaging with these narratives in my childhood. Their stories held a heaviness of judgment. In my experience, it seems the primary function of recounting their lives was to show how broken and sinful they were, and how despite their brokenness, God was merciful enough to use them.

The shame I felt was also personal; along the way, I had internalized the message that as a woman, this was my potential for being a part of God’s story too. I had been handed some harmful, one dimensional labels that immediately surfaced when I read their names, such as “harlot”, “prostitute”, “seductress” and

“adulterer” just to name a few. Their importance was not found in the context and particularity of their narratives; instead they were viewed as rough, oddly shaped pieces to the puzzle of Jesus’ lineage. I had to do some work to unbind myself from the limitations my church had placed on these stories, and I tried to visit these women with a fresh mind and an open heart. What I realized was that these women – despite the loathsome, corrupt systems they were in – found a way to claim their voice and found enough power to survive.

In this image, I chose to represent Christ using a rose at the center of the composition. The women mentioned in the genealogy are imaged as foundational leaves building and upholding Christ. All the women are looking at the viewer and holding objects that represent the fact that they took their life and survival into their own hands. They were catalysts who propelled the lineage forward.

At the bottom left, Tamar holds her father in law’s insignia, which represents how she assumes his role as the leader of the tribe of Judah and continues its lineage.

Moving counterclockwise, Rahab holds the red cord which she lowered to ensure the safety of her family after supplying Israelite spies enough information to achieve victory in Jericho.

Next, Ruth holds the wheat that she gleaned from the field. She knows that she must marry again in order to be protected, and so she takes initiative with Boaz.

Bathsheba’s name isn’t even mentioned in Christ’s genealogy; she is referred to as the “wife of Uriah.” She withstands abuse from King David, survives the murder of her husband and ensures that her son Solomon takes the throne. She takes matters into her own hands, becoming as scholar Dr. Wil Gafney writes, “the queen mother of the united Monarchy of Israel.”

Finally there is Mary who looks adoringly at the rose which represents her son. Her she holds the love and pride of a beautiful lineage that leads to the birth of her son, the Messiah.

These women only wanted to ensure safety for themselves and their children; in the process they ensured the continuation of the lineage of Christ. Without their brilliance, passion, ingenuity, resourcefulness, creativity and sacrifice, the lineage would have ended.

Matthew insists and so the foremothers of Mary are lined up to communicate all who hear something about the nature of Divinity.

Every family shares similar histories. Life is complicated. Life is messy. Sometimes the way we come to a family is not so cut and dry. Sometimes family lineage comes with adoption, or having a family of choice and not blood. What hope does Matthew offer out of all these names, this genealogy? I think he's saying to us that there is room for every story in this world. He offers a young woman, Mary, who is vulnerable, exploited, and in danger of becoming a victim of violence. More of the same. Something ordinary.

And yet, therein lies the hope of the world. In the ordinary stuff of life, there is hope. The divine one emerges in the midst of the vulnerable, the exploited, the endangered, the immoral, and the survivors of the worst that life can dish out. The Divine One, the Christ child is born again and again and again. That's the hope for the world. There's room for every story.

Let me close with this poem by Rev. Sarah Speed called "Room."

I asked God-
What about my
fingernail-biting habit
or the way I leave all the cabinets
open in the kitchen?

What about the way I can be dramatic,
drumming up a fight, only to
hand out apologies like souvenirs?

What about the way I second-guess myself,
let shame drive, or stay quiet when I
have something to say?

What about the way I chase accomplishments like a dog with a bone?

What about the doubt, or the fact

that I'm terrible at prayer and
cannot help but yawn during church?

What about
What about
What about?

My baggage might be too big for the van
But then
God called me by my first and middle name
which always means business,
and said:
Who told you that you were too much?
Sugar, there is so much room for you here.
So that's when I grabbed a seat
and we hit the road
and I knew right then
That the rumors were true.

There is room. There is room. There is room. Amen