



# The Story Goes On

TEXT  
*Matthew 1:1–17*

November 29, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

**W**e have come to that time of year when the stories we tell in church are familiar ones. I believe this is true: The stories that we tell and the stories we remember shape us. They provide identity and they bring calling. They are our light in the darkness.

Matthew had a story to tell. It was a story very familiar to his readers. They knew the Jesus story. But Matthew wanted them not only to know this story, but to understand it as well. Or better said, he wanted them to know this story so that they could stand under it; for the life revealed in this story gives life to us.

He writes one of the most important books in the world, and he begins: *The account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

I don't know if you have a favorite Bible story; but if so, I imagine Matthew 1:1–17 is not it. You would be forgiven if you gave a prayer of thanksgiving that you were not the scripture reader this morning, having to pronounce all those names.

To be such an important story, Matthew's opening is less

than riveting. There have been better beginnings.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness." You may recognize that this is the rather famous opening line of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Or what about Tolstoy's opening line of *Anna Karinina* (a name that always struck me as having too many syllables): "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

It's enough to make you want to read on.

My favorite first line of all is from John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*: "I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice. Not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother's death, but because he is the reason I believe in God. I am a Christian because of Owen Meany."

That's a pretty good first line.

We might think that Matthew could have benefitted from a writer's workshop with John

Irving or Charles Dickens. Matthew, poor Matthew ... he begins: "Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers." But he can't stop. By the time he gets to Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim ... well, you would not be alone if you were skipping ahead to the part where the angels show up.

The reason this strikes us this way is we are not listening with ears that are 2,000 years old. The folks in Matthew's church would have been paying attention because they knew these names. They knew these names well enough to know the stories that go with each name. They knew them well enough to know when Matthew got playful with the list just to make his point.

They recognized that this was not history. This is not Matthew's version of ancestry.com. We think of genealogies as lists that tell us where we came from.

My friend Chandler Stokes invited me to preach to his congregation in San Anselmo, California. I don't know what they thought of my sermon in San Anselmo, but they were fascinated by my accent. After services, one fellow asked, "Are? What kind of name is Are?" I

wanted to say, “It’s a last name” because that’s all I know about it.

He was wondering if my ancestors had come from Scotland or France or New Zealand. I didn’t bother to tell him the story my grandfather told. He told us he jumped a train to run away from home. The train made it from Maine to Charleston, South Carolina, when he fell off the train, bumped his head, suffering amnesia. He couldn’t remember his real name, so he just made up the name. I’m embarrassed to tell you how long I believed that was the truth.

He asked, “What kind of name is Are?”

I simply said, “I don’t know.”

He said, “Is it Norwegian? Do you think it’s Norwegian?”

I had already said I didn’t know, and I didn’t have any additional information since the last time he had asked. “I really don’t know.”

“It sounds Norwegian to me,” he said. He shared with me his suspected etymology of *Are*. “I think it’s Norwegian, I really do. Don’t you?”

I was beginning to realize that this conversation might not ever end, so I said, “You know, now that you mention it, I think it is Norwegian.”

“I thought so,” he said. “I could detect a little Norwegian in your accent.”

Maybe someday I’ll do some genealogical work and find out if he is right. If I do that work, I will be engaging in an exercise very different from what Matthew has done. If Matthew was trying to be historically accurate, he did a bad job. He got much of it wrong.

But Matthew’s interest is not historical; it is theological. The point that Matthew wishes to make is that Jesus came from God. Matthew does not tell us the history of Jesus; he tells the story of God. So he tells of King David, the greatest king in all of Israel. Everyone knew about David.

Of course you could see the resemblance in Jesus. And Jesus is the son of Abraham. He was the one who received the promise: “Your offspring will be as numerous as the stars.” And he was the one who received the calling: “Be a blessing to every nation under the stars.”

Anyone paying attention could see this blessing showing up in Jesus. Abraham was the father of Isaac. We know about Isaac. He took that camping trip with Abraham and almost became the sacrifice. Jesus would know about sacrifice.

They knew these stories. They knew them well enough to notice when Matthew gets playful with the list. Rahab makes an appearance.

Women were not common in ancient world genealogies — particularly women of questionable sexual history. But even more surprising was the fact that Rahab was a Gentile. Maybe that’s where Jesus gets his soft spot for Gentiles. It was quite noticeable. He seemed to love everyone.

Another woman in the genealogy is the wife of Uriah. We know her as Bathsheba. Just mention her name or the name of her murdered husband, and you lift up the worst moment in the

story of King David. Some might wish to tell the family story and leave out parts like this, but Matthew knows that what we find in Jesus is strong enough to take the whole truth, dark side and all.

Then Matthew gets even more playful. Matthew says that Abijah is the father of Asaph; but that is not right. Abijah’s son was named Asa. Some later transcribers corrected the error and changed Asaph to Asa. Asaph was a collector of the Psalms.

But then Matthew says Manasseh was the father of Amos. Of course Manasseh’s son was Amon, not Amos. Amos was the prophet.

Some say that Matthew just made some historical mistakes here. But if I understand the text, Matthew is saying that the story of God includes the soaring praise of the psalms that Asaph collected and the biting truth of the prophets, like Amos declared. And all of that is found in Jesus.

It’s all there. You see, Matthew is not telling a story of Jesus’ history. He is telling the story of what God has done. And all of that holy story shows up in Jesus, who was born as the very spirit of God with us.

It’s important to know this story because this story doesn’t end with Jesus. The story goes on. The same spirit witnessed in Jesus showed up in a long list of folks reaching all the way back to Abraham; and it continues today in ordinary folks like you and me. But that is determined by the stories we remember and the stories we tell — and how we understand those stories to speak the truth.

We have come to that time of year when the stories we tell in church are familiar ones. The stories that we tell and the stories that we remember shape us.

Matthew writes this story — in part, because he knows all people need to remember where they came from. We have all come from God.

Robert Dear is the man who opened fire inside the Planned Parenthood center in Colorado. His motivations are not known, but it would not surprise me if Mr. Dear claimed that his motivations were shaped by some inadequate understanding of Christian faith. I say that not because I know Mr. Dear, but because we have seen this before.

Several years ago, a man named Scott Roeder shot Dr. George Tiller. Tiller was an usher at the Reformation Lutheran Church, and he was in the narthex of the church on Pentecost Sunday when Scott Roeder fatally shot him. Dr. Tiller provided abortions.

I don't know what you think about abortion. I know good and faithful people who have differing views about it. It is complex, but seldom discussed in its complexities because we live in a media and political system that cannot handle complexity. Increasingly, the public in general eschews complexity; everything must be reduced to simplistic half-truths. I don't know what you think about abortion.

But I cannot understand an expression of faith that causes me to destroy my neighbor. That is not the Jesus story that I know.

The stories we tell, and the stories we remember, shape us.

I learned this week of a young Frenchman who spoke a different story. He is brokenhearted because his wife was murdered in the Paris attacks, leaving him to raise their 17-month-old son. This is what he said:

“On Friday night you stole the life of an exceptional being, the love of my life, the mother of my son, but you won't have my hatred. I don't know who you are and I don't want to know. ... If this God for which you kill indiscriminately made us in his own image, every bullet in the body of my wife will have been a wound in his heart.

“So no, I don't give you the gift of hating you. You are asking for it, but responding to hatred with anger would be giving in to the same ignorance that made you what you are.”<sup>1</sup>

This is what I know: Every day, mostly in mundane ways — but on some days in the most dramatic fashion — we have to choose what stories we will remember and what stories we will trust to light our path.

So it's a good thing that we have come to that time of year when the stories are familiar. We need to remember them again and seek to understand them well enough that we can stand under them and let them light our path. That way the story of God's love might continue even in us.

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<sup>1</sup>onbeing.org, “Where Do We Find Hope After Paris?” Omid Safi

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: [www.villagepres.org/sermons](http://www.villagepres.org/sermons).