

December 23, 2007

Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 1:18-25

Things Look Different Here

A few years ago, the Oregon tourist board sponsored a new motto contest for our state – you know that marketing concept called “branding”? My favorite motto in the running was “Oregon, Fresh Daily” but the one that won was “Oregon, things look different here.”

We might say that could be the motto for God’s word in this morning’s scripture. Isaiah shares with his people that God is going to do a new thing and things will look different than they do right now in our world where injustice and cruelty and war and homelessness and hunger are ravaging lives and communities and nations around the world. God will send someone to restore goodness and wholeness to our lives, our relationships and to the land. Wolves and lambs will hang out, leopards and baby goats will dance and play, bears and cows will go out for dinner and the menu will not be beef stroganoff. Children will be safely tucked into their own cozy beds at night and will be able to lay hopscotch safely on the streets with no fear during the day.

Things look different here in God’s dream for us.

So people wait and wait and WAIT for that new day to dawn, generation after generation they tell the story and keep hope alive, keep the dream alive.

Now Matthew announces that that Someone has come – but, guess what? – things look different here. Our first clue comes in the 17 verses before the passage that Jocelyn read. It’s called a genealogy – a great passage for a baptism when we are so aware of all the ancestors – all the people who make up our family tree and who have contributed to the arrival of this new life.

There are actually two genealogies of Jesus in the Gospels– this one at the beginning of Matthew and a different one in the 3rd chapter of Luke. Matthew traces Jesus’ roots back to King David – giving him that good housekeeping seal of approval in Jewish lineage which makes sense since Matthew is a rabbi and is sharing the story with Jewish listeners with one of his goals being to prove to his Jewish audience that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah; Luke traces Jesus’ roots right back to Adam, emphasizing Jesus’ humanity – also makes sense given Luke is a doctor sharing the story with mostly Greek audiences and with his emphasis on God’s compassion and salvation for all.

But there is something else different about Matthew’s genealogy. Luke’s follows the typical conventions of genealogies lists father/son, father/son, father/son..... But Matthew? Listen to this:

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by **Tamar**, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by **Rahab**, and Boaz the father of Obed by **Ruth**, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the **wife of Uriah**, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph,....

[skipping to verse 16] ... and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of **Mary**, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. 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.

The weird thing isn't that Matthew loves the number 14 and makes everything fall into 14's (which he has to skip some generations to do.) No, what's different is five of these cited in the lineage are women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bath Sheba and, of course, Mary.

If you are familiar enough with the culture to be able to distinguish the male from female names, you are going to be taking note – what are these women doing in a genealogy? And if you are familiar enough with the stories of the Hebrew people then you will recognize that there is a thread within this thread, a common theme. Each of these women is an outsider and vulnerable in some way.

Childless Tamar who tricks her father-in-law into sleeping with her when he refuses to allow her to marry his youngest son after the eldest sons die (a childless woman being very insecure especially into her old age in this culture, children being the primary source of today's equivalent of Social Security);

Rahab is a Canaanite (and a prostitute) who helps the Hebrews sneak into Jericho on their way to claiming the Promised Land; she and her family are granted Hebrew tribal status for this deed;

Ruth is a foreigner who refuses to leave her widowed and now childless mother-in-law, Naomi, forsaking her own chances to remarry and have children in order to care for Naomi (eventually she falls in love with Boaz) and they become the grandparents of David who becomes king;

Bathsheba is the wife of King David – David spies her bathing on a roof one afternoon and is so taken with her that he has his servants bring her to the palace and has sex with her despite the fact that she is married (to Uriah, one of the captains in the guard); she, of course, as a subject of the king is not given a choice about any of this; when she gets pregnant, David has her husband killed and marries her; tragically, the baby, Absalom, dies;

And Mary, dear sweet Mary, who has to tell her fiancée, Joseph, that she was visited by an angel who has informed her that she is about to become pregnant, and God is the Dad. OK, then! Did you notice that in Matthew's version, the angel comes to Joseph, too? (Bible Trivia)

This weird genealogy is the prelude to an even weirder story of a baby born in a barn, with peasants and tax seasons and layettes and angels and stars and shepherds and more angels and visiting philosopher/astronomers and baby shower gifts and drummer boys and prophecies and murderous plots and midnight escapes.

A family tree and a tale full of both the outrageous details of divine purpose and the messy details of human life. And isn't that just about perfect? For who does this baby grow up to be but the One who reveals God's heart and divine purpose by ministering to the outcasts and the outsiders, the One who eats with sinners, who is accused of being both a merry-maker and a rebel, the one who eats with us, cries with us, laughs with us, dies like us, the One who rises for us: **Emmanuel, God with us.**

So, on this day of baptism, we remember a Mom and a Dad and a baby who grows up to show us the way to God's heart and the path to God's kin-dom, a place that "looks different here" – where the law is love; where we are forgiven and forgiving 7 x 70; where compassion replaces fear; where there is more than enough to go around so we no longer hoard and hide from one another; where there are no outsiders and outcasts but a place at the table and in the circle for everyone. A new beginning. A new day. What better reminder of the hope that comes into our hearts than a baby? And what better reminder than Tamar and Rahab and Ruth and Bathsheba and Mary that there's a place for all of us at that stable and in this lineage of lovers of God and seekers of God's way?