

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alive in the Adventure of Jesus: Messy Family”
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Genesis 12:1-3, Matthew 1:1-17

It is for me a haunting kind of picture. It is black and white, taken sometime around the turn of the last century. In it are multiple children, all dressed in threadbare clothes, loosely gathered around a young woman, hair bedraggled, cooking on an outdoor fire with an old cast-iron skillet. The children are all barefoot and the home, if you can call it that, behind them, is no more than loose boards on a frame. The woman in this picture is my great-grandmother. One of the young boys, my grandfather. The setting is rural Louisiana where that part of my family is from. The background is that my great-grandmother was an itinerant school teacher. She would walk, with her five children, from community to community, seeing if the people had a small house, or shack, some money and a willingness to pay her to teach their children in the local one room school house. Often her pay was no more than enough food to keep her children fed. Then she had to take on her sister and her sisters children as well. But the one question to which I could never get an answer was why was the woman, who was married to a doctor, struggling to put food on the table. My grandfather would not say. All he would ever allow was that there was “a series of unfortunate incidents” that had caused his mother to flee. It is not hard for us to read between the lines and sense that those unfortunate incidents probably included abuse. Somehow this was the messy part of our family’s past that no one wanted to reveal.

I wonder if that’s how Mary and Joseph felt when people read this opening part of Matthew; because it shows just how messy their family was. That they would prefer that people just refer to much of it as a series of unfortunate incidents. I realize that for many of us when we listen to this genealogy of Jesus all we hear is the Charlie Brown, wah wah, wah, wah; names, names, names, names. But what we should be hearing is just how messy and scandalous Jesus’ background really is. First we have Tamar, who when her husband dies, dresses as a prostitute and sleeps with her father-in-law so she can have the child she deserves. Next we have Rahab, who was a prostitute who protects two spies in exchange for her life. Then we have Ruth, who was a foreigner who offers herself to an older man on the advice of her mother-in-law. Then we have Manasseh who was probably the worst king in all of the history of Judah. He worshipped other gods and put their statues in the Temple. And he killed anyone who opposed him. This is one messy family. It certainly does not seem like a fitting family for Jesus of Nazareth, the one true messiah. But there it is. Almost as good as having to choose death or Texas.

What is interesting about this messy family story is that the church tried to fix it so that it was not a story often retold in all its messiness. The church tried to fix it with Mary and then with Joseph. It tried to fix it with Mary by essentially lifting her out of any connection with all those people...and by lifting her out then Jesus would also be lifted out. The church did this by adopting two doctrines. The first was that of the Immaculate Conception, not to be confused, football fans, with the immaculate reception. The Immaculate Conception is the doctrine that when Mary the mother of Jesus was conceived, the Holy Spirit protected her from the stain of the original sin. Thus she was born pure and holy. The second

doctrine was that of eternal virginity, which declared that she was a virgin at conception, birth, and forever. The only problem with both of these once again is the Biblical story itself. Mary, while being an amazing young woman, was still just that, an amazing young woman, living with a messy family. She and Joseph would go on to have other children and she would not completely understand Jesus' mission. Even going so far as to once try to corral him and bring him back home.

The church tried to remove Joseph from the messiness by having him declared to be a saint. Though he is not credited with any miracles, he is spoken of as the protector of the redeemer, as the one who protected Mary from condemnation because she was pregnant and unwed. He is also seen as the one through whom Jesus' Davidic lineage comes. In addition, we might assume he was a very patient husband since Mary was an eternal virgin. Yet even with all of that, he is the one who carries the lineage of Abraham who twice gave away his wife to protect himself; of King David who broke half of the Ten Commandments including adultery, stealing, murder, coveting and lying; and King Solomon who worshipped other gods and essentially set the kingdom on the road to ruin. In a sense then there is no escaping the messy family from which either Mary or Joseph come from. So what then? What are we to do with these messy stories?

The answer I would offer is this. We are to see this messy family story as the story God always intended to tell. For you see, God always planned that the salvation of the world would come through a messy family and not from a perfect pair of partners. Let me explain. When we read the Genesis text from this morning, we hear Abraham being promised (and all of you who have been in the Two Year Bible Trek class can say this with me) land, seed and blessing if he is faithful. He was promised a place, progeny, and prosperity. But more importantly for our purposes he was told that all of the nations would be blessed through him and through his family. In other words, Abraham was never promised that everything would be perfect, or that he would be perfect. Instead he was promised that if he were faithful to God, things would go well for him and for the world. His was to be the messy human family through which the redeemer of the world would arrive. And this is the story that is told in genealogy at the beginning of Matthew. That God had fulfilled God's promise to save the world through the very messiness of Abraham's family. That, in a sense, regardless of how messy things got, God was still faithful and God's plan was still at work.

My hope this morning is that this concept that God saves the world through a messy family will come as good news to you. I hope it is good news for two reasons. First, it is that God can still be at work in our very messy world; that God does not require practically perfect people to make this world look more and more like God's kingdom. Second, I hope it comes as good news because it says that God can use you and me, even when we and our families are messy. And this is important because we are those who have been called to bless the world, because we are part of the messy family of Abraham. By committing ourselves to following Jesus we are adopted into Abraham's family; adopted in so that we can be blessed and that we can be a blessing to the world. So that we can continue to make a positive difference for men and women both here and around the world.

My challenge to you this morning then is this, to ask yourselves, how am I blessing the world? How in all the messiness of life and family, am I being a blessing to those near and far?