

Advent, Day 16

Monday, December 17

Read Matthew 1:1-17

"...and Solomon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, the prostitute..." Matthew 1:5

SKELETONS IN THE CLOSET

I'll bet you skimmed the reading for today, didn't you? There is probably no more effective deterrence to the decision to read through the New Testament than to start with Matthew 1 and run immediately up against that list of names. A list of names, and many of them unpronounceable. It's enough to make you throw in the towel before you ever get started.

But if you take a closer look, you might find some things that make looking at the list a little more intriguing. It's like a mystery novel with a bunch of hidden clues. It's like a treasure hunt in unfamiliar territory.

Have you ever wandered through an old graveyard and begun to wonder about the people whose names you see carved in stone? Have you ever wished you knew some of their stories? Well, wondering through Matthew 1 is like walking through Jesus' family plot. Many of the names there you will find with more flesh on them in the Old Testament. And some of them are very interesting.

You see, one of Matthew's purposes in writing his gospel is to connect Jesus with the ancient past in Israel, and with the prophecies centered around the Messiah. He wants to show how Jesus is the fulfillment of the ancient hope, even though the kingdom to which he calls us may be different than the one which had been expected.

I believe that Matthew is very choosy, therefore, about who gets included in the list of names. He is very intentional in who gets mentioned. What we notice almost immediately is that there are names there that you would not expect to find in any self-respecting Messiah's family tree.

Tamar. The wife of Uriah (Bathsheba). Rahab. Each of those names would immediately bring to mind their story for a people whose history was remembered orally, and whose stories always told something about the nature of the Hebrew people, the nature of God, and the relationship between God and Israel.

What the story of each of the women mentioned in Jesus' family tree would tell us is that God can use even the worst of circumstances in people's lives to bring something good out of it. God can use even the worst that we can do to one another to help us move toward the ultimate goal of good. God always has a higher purpose in mind for human lives, and sometimes we realize that purpose, and sometimes that purpose is realized only in the final outcome, which we, living in the immediate present, may not see.

Jacob was a cheat and a liar. Rahab a prostitute. David a philanderer and a murderer. Bathsheba an adulteress. Ruth was a foreigner. Tamar the victim of a rape who slept with her own father-in-law. Solomon had so many wives and concubines that he lost track of the count. Mary had her child out of wedlock.

And Jesus. Jesus ended up being crucified as a criminal at the hands of Rome and the authorities in Israel. Yet he was the One for whom all history had been waiting.

We may have skeletons in our own closet. But God can still use us to bring the kingdom to fulfillment. God never seems to do just what is expected.

Which gives me hope for this time, and for all times.