

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERIES: Heaven Came Down

SERMON: "God With Us"

(Acknowledgment to Ken Bailey and Tim Keller for their insight into Matthew 1)

Our sermon series during the month of Advent is called **Heaven Came Down** and this morning's message is titled: **"God With Us"**.

This morning we're going to be in Matthew's gospel, chapter 1...and is it ever interesting. The first half consists of a long list of names that are tempting to just skim over. The second half contains words that are so familiar to many of us that there is this danger of being lulled to sleep by them.

Let's start with the...

1. A LONG LIST OF NAMES

...found in the first half of Matthew's gospel before we turn our attention to the more familiar words found in the second half.

Matthew 1 begins with what is called a genealogy. A genealogy is **a list of names** that make up a family history going back through many generations, and what we have here in Matthew is the genealogy of Jesus going through the line of His earthly father Joseph. And this is just one of several genealogies found in both the Old and New Testament.

Now, what do you do – what have you done – when you’re reading through your Bible and you come to one of them?

I know that a lot of people just pass over them and pick up at the conclusion of that list of names. And why is that? Because it’s just a list of names, right? We like stories! Something that draws us in and has a point. You see a long list of names and you say to yourself, *“What’s the point? I don’t know who many of these people are...I don’t know their stories.”*

I’ve been right there with you. But this time, when I opened my Bible to Matthew 1 and looked at this long list of names, I saw that at some point in the past, I had underlined a few of the names. Don’t know when, don’t know why, but there they were, 44 names in all with 4 of the names underlined.

Those names were **Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and “Uriah’s wife”** who we know was Bathsheba.

Anything stand out in regards to these 4 names? All women, right? All Gentiles perhaps? And just to clarify, a Gentile is one who is not a Jew...those who would not have been a part of this covenant between God and the Jews.

For some reason, at some point in the past, I had underlined the names of these women, and the very fact that their names appear at all would be very unusual, because as Ken Bailey points out, middle eastern genealogies were expected to be lists of men and men only.

Luke has a genealogy at the start of His gospel, going through the lineage of Mary rather than Joseph, and Luke takes the standard approach...66 names in this genealogy and not a woman or a Gentile among them.

And so it might be worth taking a few minutes to see why in the world Matthew would have been inspired to do the unthinkable and include these 4 women in this genealogy of Jesus. What are their stories?

What was **Tamar’s story**?

In short, it's the story of a woman who sleeps with her father-in-law and thus becomes pregnant. What in the world?

So here's the back story...Tamar marries the oldest of three brothers, and before they have children, her husband dies. The custom – the expectation – was that the second oldest brother would marry Tamar, and their first son would inherit the estate of Tamar's first husband, the deceased older brother.

This would ensure the carrying on of the family line of the older brother, and as this son grew older he would be expected to provide support and protection for Tamar.

Well, this second brother does what is expected of him, he marries Tamar, yet just as happened with his older brother, he met an untimely death as well. The youngest brother was too young to marry at this point, but once he did grow up Tamar realized that he was not going to do what was expected and marry her.

So she came up with this plan to disguise herself and go out along this road where her father in law – Judah – would soon be passing.

Genesis 38:15 When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. Not realizing she was his daughter-in-law, he went over to her by the roadside and said, “Come now, let me sleep with you.”

He did, and she became pregnant.

Genesis 38:24 About three months later Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant.”

Judah is furious and demands that she be burned to death. But Tamar was able to prove to Judah that he was the one who had impregnated her, leading him to confess that she was more righteous than he. And here she is, listed in this genealogy of Jesus.

What was **Rahab's story**?

Well, she didn't dress as a prostitute, she *was* a prostitute. She was definitely a Gentile. She lived in a city called Jericho, and the Jews – under the leadership of Joshua - set out to conquer the city. Joshua sent out two Jews to spy on the city before invading it, and Rahab ends up saving the lives of those two spies when they were about to be discovered.

Somehow Rahab became convinced that the God of Israel was the One True God, telling the two spies at one point...

Joshua 2:11b “...the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on earth below.”

And so this harlot - this prostitute- finds *herself* listed in the genealogy of Jesus.

How about **Ruth's story**?

Like Rahab, she was not a Jew, she was from a land called Moab...she was a Moabite. However Ruth and her sister ended up marrying two Jewish brothers – sisters marrying brothers - who had moved with their parents from Bethlehem to the land of Moab.

Eventually the father and the two sons all died, leaving the 3 women all alone. Ruth's mother-in-law knew that her only hope of survival was to return back to Bethlehem. Ruth's sister was going to remain in Moab, but Ruth decided to leave her homeland and go with her mother-in-law, saying...

Ruth 1:16b “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”

Ruth ended up marrying a distant relative of her mother-in-law and became the grandmother of King David. Though she was a Gentile her story is one of commitment, faith and courage.

Then we come to the 4th woman in the genealogy; her name was Bathsheba. What was **Bathsheba's story**?

She was married to a man by the name of Uriah who is off on the battlefield. One night David notices her bathing in a nearby courtyard and calls for her, sleeps with her, she becomes pregnant and David ensures that Uriah is killed on the battlefield before his sin was discovered. Then he takes Bathsheba for his wife.

What is very interesting, as you look at this long list of names, is that Matthew does not identify Bathsheba name, simply referring to her as “Uriah’s wife.” Why would that be?

Author Ken Bailey’s view is that Matthew may have viewed her with some disdain. Did she sleep with David and be unfaithful to Uriah against her will, or was she a willing player? We don’t know, but Bailey suggests that this may be the reason that Matthew refuses to call her by name.

And so here in this genealogy - this long list of names - we have four women and the question on the table is why? **Why does Matthew include them?**

Matthew would have remember that Jesus not only brought men, but also **women into His circle of disciples** – Mary, Joanna, Susanna and many others. He would have recalled how these women used their own money to help support the ministry of Jesus as He traveled from town to town. Matthew would have understood that in Jesus’ kingdom...

Galatians 3:28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, nor slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Matthew may also have wanted to include both **Jews and Gentiles**. Tamar may have been a Gentile. Rahab and Ruth clearly were. Bathsheba was married to Uriah, who was a Gentile, and she may have been as well. And we know that Jesus came not just for the Jews, but for Gentiles as well.

Matthew may have wanted to include both **Sinners and Saints**. Here in these stories we see brokenness and deceit, while also seeing courage and incredible faith.

And so looking at this genealogy we now see that there is much more here than just a long list of names. With this list Matthew gives us some insight into the kinds of people that Jesus came to save. Men and Women. Jews and Gentiles. Sinners and Saints.

It's a comprehensive list, and here's the thing: ***All of us can look at this list and see some reflection of ourselves.***

And that's a good thing, because no matter who you are...you are just the kind of person that Jesus came to save.

You may not have grown up in the church, you know next to nothing about Jesus and the Bible, and because of that you think you're an outsider. Not true, Jesus came for you. You may have come to church all your life. Doesn't matter, that's not going to save you, and so Jesus came for you as well.

You may come in here with a history of sexual activity that you know has been harmful to you and to others, and maybe think that Jesus wants nothing to do with you. Not true, Jesus came for you too. Even those of you who have lived respectable lives, you know that's not enough don't you? So He came for you as well.

Sinners and saints. Long-time church goers and those who have no idea what this is all about. He came for us all. And this genealogy makes that clear.

Now...if you have Matthew 1 there in front of you, you see that once Matthew concludes the genealogy, that we enter into the section that contains familiar words for many of us. Matthew tells us how Mary was found to be with child, and Joseph decides to divorce her quietly.

An angel appears to Joseph and tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife...give the baby the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.

Matthew 1:22- 23 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord has said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" – which means, "God with Us."

Pretty familiar words. Maybe too familiar. And so the challenge is how do we let these words speak to us instead of lulling us to sleep? Let's dig into these three words..

2. GOD WITH US

...deeper than we ever have before.

John Wesley was a great theologian who lived in the 1700's. He lived a long life, passing away at the age of 88. On the day of his death, with family and friends gathered around him, they say that Wesley repeatedly told them farewell. Finally, at the end, when all of his strength was nearly gone, he spoke his last words, "**The best of all, is God with us.**"

He died with those words on his lips, but lived with that truth deep in his heart. Wouldn't you like to do the same? So what I'd like to do is simply take a look at all three words, one at a time in order for their significance to sink in and speak to us rather than lull us to sleep. So first...

A. JESUS IS GOD

This is the message of Christmas. You can boil everything that we talk about, write about, sing about to one simple message, and it is this: **God Himself came to us as a human being.**

The Scriptures proclaim that Jesus is God in many different ways. Sometimes directly:

John 1:1,14a In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Sometimes, it's more indirect. Many of you are familiar with the time that Jesus walked on water, and after doing so there came a point where this happened...

Matthew 14:33 ...those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Do you have *any idea* just how unlikely it would be for any of disciples to worship another human being? For any first century Jew to worship another human being?

The Jews were Monotheist, which means that unlike the Greeks and Romans who believed in many gods, the Jews believed in One, and One only. They knew the 10 Commandments, and the very first one: No other gods! And so they were the last people that would worship a human being as God.

And yet they did.

What would have moved them to do the unthinkable? And the answer must be found not just in the claims that He made...but in the life that He lived. He backed up His words with the life that He lived.

Those who were closest to Him, they saw almost every move He made. And if you or I were looking to convince someone else that we were God, the very last people we would look to convince would be those who know us best.

Karen and Olivia, they see my flaws, they know my flaws. All of those on the staff - Ray, Brian, Julie, Ellen - ...they all see and know my flaws. Those closest to you know yours as well.

I once heard somebody say that all of those people who go to Graceland to, in a sense "worship" Elvis...they never lived with him.

But here is Jesus, not only claiming to be God but backing it up...actually living a life without without fault, without sin.

It was the only way that His disciples would ever even consider worshipping Him. Did they seem to forget who Jesus was at times? Yes, we see that. But still, they saw something that convinced them of the impossible...Heaven had come down. *God Himself was with them, and was worthy of their worship.*

And after the resurrection, this awareness that *God* was still with them through the Holy Spirit changed them forever.

And I want you to be encouraged by this, because just like those first century Jews, we can be worshipping Jesus one minute and in the next minute, so easily forget that He is with us. We can worship Jesus one minute, and the next minute give in to temptation.

I've done that. And I imagine that you have as well. But I *know* who Jesus is. And many of you do as well. Many of us here this morning are living our lives convinced that Jesus is God and we have already experienced and continue to experience His work in our lives...changing us forever. We know that God is with us.

Not only that,...

B. JESUS IS WITH US

This is the beautiful part. God Himself has entered into a personal, intimate relationship with us. But what does this really mean?

Tim Keller tells the story about a young lady who loved a certain celebrity singer. This young lady would study the singer, reading about her, buying and listening to all of her songs. And whenever this singer would come to the area for a concert, the young lady would be there in the first row. And what a thrilling experience it was for her.

And yet, when the opportunity presented itself for her to meet this celebrity face to face, she couldn't and wouldn't do it. I don't know if it was intimidation, if it was fear of rejection...all I know is that this young lady experienced the celebrity singer, but did not know her personally.

In the same way, I believe **it is possible to experience God and yet never allow Him to be with you in a personal and intimate relationship.**

I've talked before about how much I love going to the ocean and just watching and listening to the waves, and in doing so experience the creative power of God. I can be in awe of such

power. I can go out into my back yard and look up into the sky and see thousands upon thousands of stars, and be in awe of the God who breathed this universe into existence.

And so the question becomes, what is it that keeps many people who have experienced God in a powerful way, from taking that next step, that deeper step and actually being *with* God in a personal and intimate relationship?

Maybe it's because we not only find God inspiring – in the waves and in the stars...but like the young woman, there is also along with the inspiration, an element of fear.

We're talking God here! Who wouldn't have some degree of hesitancy, some degree of unworthiness, some degree of fear when in His actual presence.

You read the Scriptures and they are full of stories about how God appeared and broke into people's lives... in ways that brought about responses ranging from confusion to terror. God appeared to Job as a whirlwind, telling Job to "brace yourself." He appeared to Abraham as a smoking pot and blazing torch...to Moses as a burning bush.

On one occasion, Moses asked God if he could see Him, and God in essence said, "You wouldn't survive." And so God simply shows Moses his "hind parts"...just a glimpse...and it's enough to turn Moses face so radiant from the glory of God that it frightens his brother and the people...so he puts a veil over his face so they won't be terrified.

But here's the thing about *God With Us*...Jesus didn't come as a whirlwind or as a burning bush, but He came in humility as a baby, which is just about the most innocent and least frightful thing that we'll ever come across.

And when Jesus grew to be a man, **He couldn't make it any clearer just how much God longs to be with us.**

For instance, Jesus told 3 parables found in the 15th chapter of Luke's gospel. The sheep that is lost, then found, and the rejoicing of the shepherd. The coin that is lost, then found, and the rejoicing of the woman. Except Jesus isn't talking about sheep or coins or shepherds or

women. He's talking about the joy God takes in "finding" you and me...this reconciliation that brings about such great rejoicing.

And then the 3rd parable of the lost son...who leaves his father and goes and assumes a lifestyle that would break his father's heart. Yet when he comes to his senses and slinks back home, his father runs out to meet him, throws his arms around him, kisses him, and throws a party to end all parties.

Except Jesus isn't talking about a son and his father. He is talking about Himself. And you. And me. Who have lived at times in ways that just break God's heart. And still, He longs to be *with* us. To rejoice with us during those times when we trust Him and obey Him by doing His will.

Jesus taught many things that lets us know that we need not be hesitant or afraid to come to Him. There is just one thing that we need to be, which brings us to the final word that we want to look at this morning: Us.

C. JESUS IS WITH US

Who then, is "us?"

It's a dangerous word you know. Because it's so easy to interpret it wrong.

Some may mistakenly think that those of us who live what we define as respectable lives are "in"...while others who aren't in church and who are not living respectable lives in this or that area are "out." Us and them.

But as I read the Gospels, here is what I see: The "us" were those who were broken and didn't have an ounce of self-righteousness in them. Jesus wanted to be with them. They didn't reject Him, in fact, they found themselves drawn to Him.

They found themselves wanting to be *with Him*, and their lives were changed. They were both men and women. Jews and Gentiles. Those viewed as sinners and yes, even some who were viewed as saints.

If you are sitting here this morning and you've never felt that Jesus would want to be with you...you're wrong. If you let Him in, I'm betting you'll find yourself drawn to Him. Feel free to talk to me after the service, so we can talk about setting up a time to meet and talk about this some more.

If you are one that already knows Jesus in a personal way, let me leave you with this thought...

On that day that Moses came down from the mountain with his face so radiant he needed a veil...do you know what Moses brought with him? He had these stone tablets which contained God's laws...do not lie, do not steal, do not covet. The Scriptures call them **the ministry of death**...because no one can keep them.

But the Scriptures also tell us that if those tablets of death still came with that kind of glory, what kind of glory must come with this new kingdom that Jesus has ushered in?

If Moses were here today, he would very likely say to us, *"Do you have any idea just how good you have it? Do you realize what it means to have God With You?"*

Moses wore a veil that hid the radiance of God and the fading of that radiance. But the Scriptures tell us...

II Corinthians 3:12 We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was passing away.

The Scriptures go on to tell us that Jesus has taken the veil away...

II Corinthians 3:18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory...

Jesus has come – God is With Us - and now there is no holding back. He has removed the veil that would keep us from seeing and knowing *and reflecting* the glory of God. And so let's not hold anything back.

Let's go from here and be kind to everyone, seek justice, work for peace, love those who others push away. Reflecting His glory even as we are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory.

What a thought! What a promise! What a great God and Savior.