

4 December 2003
Advent Midweek 1

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Jesus: Descended from Sinners”

Text: Matthew 1:1-6 (Genesis 12:1-3; Mark 6:1-3)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

2 Timothy 3:16 tells us that “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching.*” That would include the genealogy of Jesus. Mostly we tend to skip over these verses and their hard-to-pronounce names. But these verses are included for us as part of the Sacred Scriptures, and so are useful and profitable for us, if we take the time to consider them. And so we will do so this Advent, as we prepare our hearts and minds to remember the coming of our Saviour at Christmas.

And when you read down this first part of Jesus’ genealogy, the first thing you notice is that . . . well, Jesus’ family is a little embarrassing! **He’s descended from sinners.** For in this list is Jacob, whose name means cheater, or deceiver, which he did when he took the birthright and blessing from his brother Esau by tricking his brother and his father. Then there’s Judah, who agreed to sell his brother Joseph into slavery to get rid of him, and Tamar, his daughter-in-law, who had two children with him when she dressed up like a prostitute and tricked Judah, her father-in-law, into sleeping with her. A little later came Rahab, who was a prostitute. And then David and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, who committed adultery, and then lied and murdered to cover it up.

Next, notice that Jesus isn’t even descended from pure Israelite blood – all the women mentioned in this list are foreigners. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites, Ruth was from the land of Moab, and Bathsheba was a Hittite.

It doesn’t seem to be the kind of family tree that you’d want to widely publicize, or today, post on a web site for all to see. And yet, not only are all these folks listed here, but it seems as if Matthew goes out of his way to make sure they are listed! In those days, it was not the usual custom to list the wives and mothers in a family tree, and yet look at who Matthew includes! And consider who he left out! No mention of Sarah, or Rebekah, or Rachel . . . he includes the foreigners, the prostitutes, the adulterers – even *highlighting* David’s adultery by listing Bathsheba not by her name, but as the wife of another man. Matthew hangs out all the dirty laundry.

And that's exactly how God, who inspired these words and this genealogy, wanted it! Because these folks, these sinners, were not Jesus' ancestors by accident. God is not ashamed of them, not a one of them. For these were the people Jesus came to save. These were the sins that Jesus came to bear for us. Or as the Early Church Father named Severus wrote: "*Christ therefore took upon himself a blood relationship to that nature which fornicated, in order to purify it. He took on that very nature that was sick, in order to heal it. He took on that nature which fell, in order to lift it up.*" . . . And so when we read this list of names from Matthew, we need to remember that it is not only a list of names, a genealogy, but a recounting of salvation history! And far from hiding the sins of these ancestors, Matthew is almost *proud* of it, because it shows how great is the grace and mercy of God, and how overpowering and encompassing the scope of His forgiveness.

And so we make a mistake if we consider these folks only as sinners – we need to also see the faith that God worked in them, as He provided His forgiveness for them, and as He chose these people to be the ancestors of the human nature of His Son. We heard in the first reading of God's promise to Abraham, and the promise that the Saviour would come from Abraham's line. And what faith was given to Abraham, as he left family and country at God's Word. Isaac was the child of God's promise, born to Sarah who was barren and after she was already too old to have children. Rahab was a prostitute, yes, but she also helped the people of Israel into the Promised Land and then lived with them and became one of them after that. Ruth also, like Abraham, left her people to become a part of the nation of Israel. And David was one of the greatest kings of Israel.

And so again we hear from Severus: "*The Evangelist exposes and derides the passions of our race, its dishonors and ailments, to which the Word of God descended in mercy. . . . It in no way reflects badly upon the physician that he stoops to the level of those who are sick.*" And then we read in the book of Hebrews [2:16-17]: "***For surely it is not angels that He helps, but He helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore He had to be made like His brothers in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make [atonement] for the sins of the people.***"

And so Jesus descended from sinners for sinners. He descended from Israel for Israel. He descended from Gentiles for Gentiles. He became what we are, so that we might become as He is. . . . Now this very fact offended some, as we heard in the second reading. They saw His human nature, they saw who He was descended from, and they "***took offense at Him!***" How could such a one be the promised Messiah, the Saviour? . . . But the real question is, how could our Messiah be anything but?

And so are there some unlikely characters in Jesus' family tree? Good, for so is the person sitting in your pew. For if Jesus' family tree was to include only the "blue bloods," the best, the high and mighty, then you and I would be disqualified. But we take our place with Jacob, Judah, and Tamar; with Rahab, David, and Bathsheba; with Ruth and all the rest, knowing that it is not because we are qualified to be in Jesus' family, but because He is qualified. Because He came to forgive sinners like us, to incorporate foreigners like us, and to give the hopeless hope. And so He is not ashamed of His family tree, and not of us – not in the least. No, He calls to us from the manger and from the cross; He calls us to His forgiveness; He calls us to Himself. He takes what is ours and gives us what is His, that joined to Him we may be partakers of His life – now and forever.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.