

Ephesians 1.3-10

Matthew 1.1-17

As children we are surrounded by mystery, everything is new and magical. We approach the newness of life that we find with eyes wide open, open to experience, embracing the mystery of things we do not understand. And then we grow up. We find trade in mysteries for explanations. We turn away from what is mysterious to what we know, to things that we can understand. As we move through life, we find ways to avoid the mysterious. We close our eyes off to things that are new and lose the childlike wonder that guides us through life. We tell ourselves that there is no mystery left in ourselves, no mystery left in those closest to us, there are no mysteries left in the world. The lack of mystery left in our modern world, for all of our understanding, is our great poverty. By approaching the world this way, we end up treating worship the exact same way. We get so used to the routine of the Church calendar, and we feel that we have heard the Good News so many times, we think we have grasped it fully. So this morning, let us embrace the mystery of life, let us with the wide eyes of children gaze upon the mystery of God's will.

In our reading from Matthew, we are given a long, and difficult to pronounce, list of names recording the genealogy of Jesus, the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. We see these lists all the time, and they can seem kinda boring. This is normally the kind of list that many of us just gloss over, the kind of list that we normally skip because we want to get further in the story. We want to get into the meat of the Gospel, to the birth narrative that we love so dearly. But Matthew begins his Gospel with this, which could be translated as a genealogy, or an origin, or a new genesis, a new Creation. A new Creation, from the old Creation, that is the mystery of the coming of the Messiah. This is not only the opening line of the Gospel, it is the

title, this is the Book of Genesis, wrought by Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. This is not just the title of the Gospel, but it contains within it, the genealogy that follows, and beyond that it contains the birth of Jesus in the coming chapters, and beyond that it refers to the life of Jesus the Messiah, and beyond that it covers the mysterious work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Matthew's Gospel, would more properly be titled this opening sentence, containing within it an ever unfolding telescope of everything that follows. Containing within it the depth of everything that is to come, holding within it the mystery that only gets expanded as we delve further into the book.

We begin this genealogy with Abraham, the unspectacular man who was called by God from his homeland, and given this miraculous promise that all of the families and nations of the earth would be blessed through him. But Abraham is still a man who allowed Pharaoh to take Sarah as his own wife. For all we are told about his righteousness, and his obedience, he still does not seem like he should be the father of the promise. He does not even seem like a blessing to his own family. And then he is followed by Isaac, the second son, who was chosen over Ishmael, for reasons so mysterious that many rabbis have spilled ink in order to explain this line of inheritance. And Isaac was the father of Jacob, the man who glued hair to his arm in order to steal his father's blessing. But God looked down, not with the feeble eyes of old Isaac but with perfect understanding, seeing this ridiculous scene, and said yup that's my guy. As we go through this line, we become more and more aware of how unseemly this group truly is, from which this new genesis is arising. The picture we get is not of saints given a promise, remaining in faithful covenant with their God, but individuals who were just so human in their actions, actions which God blessed, in a will which seemed beyond mysterious, almost nonsensical. God's will to act through these humans makes absolutely no sense, working through individuals

who have so much moral ambiguity, a line with so many twists and turns that the new genesis cannot be seen before it finally appears. Even with the wide eyes of a child, this mystery remains a mystery. It remains something that cannot be understood apart from the fullness of time. As we look at these people we cannot help to feel close to them, sharing some of the same faults, and the closer we feel to these real people, the deeper the mystery of Christ's coming seems to be.

And as it continues it does not get any better, we find Tamar, the woman who tricked her father in law into thinking she was a temple prostitute so she could conceive a child, Perez, who of course makes the list. And with that list has taken a turn from being head scratching to the downright scandalous. Which is when we encounter Boaz, the son of the foreign prostitute Rahab, who made the Israelite spies who visited her, take that however you would like, promise that she would be spared from her city's destruction. And Boaz had a son through the foreigner, Ruth. Ruth, who conspired with her mother in law, Naomi to orchestrate the marriage with Boaz. It would be incredible enough that Matthew would include women at all, even if they were matriarchs, women held in the utmost esteem among the people, but these women just weren't. The mystery of God's will acted through these women, who were not children of the promise, who have stories that even make us squeamish today. Matthew could have easily left them out, cleaning up the image of this genesis, since there are already plenty of men who do a fantastic job of dirtying it up. But he leaves them in, he retains all of the parts that add a darkness, a skeeviness to this line, he retains all of the parts which witness to the mystery of Jesus the Christ's coming, elevating the mystery of God working through men and women of ill repute, Jews and Gentiles, to bring about something new.

And then miracle of miracles, through this strange assortment of people we come to King David, the ideal king. But Matthew does not give us one second to be nostalgic about the Sunday

School lessons we heard as children about the good king, we are immediately reminded that he fathered Solomon with the wife of Uriah the Hittite. And as we look down the list of kings they really don't get any better, between Solomon with his 700 wives and 300 concubines, to Rehoboam who lost the united kingdom of Israel. The list goes on to include a group so terrible that eventually God just led them into exile. The list finally comes to an end, concluding with Jesus' adopted father. Which seems like a strange way to end the list, because Matthew certainly knew where babies came from, and knew that Joseph was not related to Jesus biologically. In near eastern tradition, Joseph acknowledged his legal role as the father of Jesus, looking at the Christ, the telos of salvation history, from this imperfect genealogy and said He belongs to us. This new creation, is the son of David, son of Abraham. Unlike any other ancient genealogy it is not the progenitor who gives importance to the final name, but it is the one who was before time, who came into this line, it is the Christ who gives it meaning.

This list that we find at the beginning of Matthew is not just an account of names that are too hard to pronounce, or a list of people who we have long forgotten, or a boring introductory section to a Gospel. This is the old creation, the old creation from which Christ creates anew. We do not find any saints, any people who we could hold up and say that God was working through this holy people. What we find is a holy mystery of God's work, working through unholy people, we find ourselves amongst all of these people who make us slightly uneasy. It is the holy mystery of the new creation, arising from the depths of God's will for the world, through people who make absolutely no sense. Christ is the ending which makes sense of this strange line of people, who we follow through a complicated history with their God, not because of their ability to be a sacred people set apart from the depths of humanities lowliness, but because of the glory of God's will to be close to us in our lowliness.

As Paul said to us this morning, God chose us before the foundation of the world, not because we are holy and blameless, but because in the love of God we become holy and blameless. It was through His will, and through His will alone that we have been adopted as His children, through Christ. And it is this incredible mystery of God's will, which acts in ways that seem to make little to no sense, to choose all of us, to make the weakness of humanity become part of the new creation. The will of God for the fullness of time, is to gather up all things to Him, all of the old creation, all of its faults, and failures, into Christ, into the new creation, the new genesis which is arising up before us. It is in this mystery that we must look upon and continue to marvel in, continue to reflect upon. Seeing everything around us, everything which is dark and bitter, everything which is terrible and depressing, gathered up in Christ. To see the mystery of the God who is mysterious not because He is so far off, so unlike ourselves, but because of His incredible closeness to each of us. Brought so near to us in love, we can only bow before this mysterious love, allowing it surprise us again and again.

And this is the continued mystery that we must embrace, as the people who can still find our faults among this old creation. We continue to be reminded of the mystery of Christ's closeness to us, the closeness of our God, not to who we would like to be, or who we imagine ourselves to be, but who we truly are. We find our Christ coming to us, in the most mysterious closeness, which we continue to explore through the years of our lives and the millennia of the church. We continue to look for the Christ who is so close to us, deep in the old creation, coming with the new creation. I know all of you have heard this good news before, and it would be easy to blind ourselves to the mystery, but this is a mystery which we must approach with the wide open eyes of a child, year after year, Advent after Advent.