

Christmas Eve—2017

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Hearing this evening's gospel  
and seeing the cover of the worship aid  
reminds me of the promotions  
for Ancestry.com  
which feature individuals  
searching for their biological roots.

The gospel writer wants to make it absolutely clear  
that the biological roots of Jesus—  
the One we proclaim as  
Emmanuel,  
the Son of God,  
the Anointed One,  
the Promised Messiah,  
are indisputably traced to Abraham.  
That long list we just heard announced  
is 3 sets of 14 generations each!

And each of those individual ancestors  
by Providential design —not by coincidence  
had a decisive role  
in bringing the Messiah to birth.

Jesus' genealogy is  
an illustrious one,  
including the revered patriarchs  
Jacob  
Judah,  
David and Solomon.

But just like so many of those Ancestry customers,  
who get unexpected results of their DNA analysis  
there are some surprises lurking in Matthew's account of Jesus' family tree.

His ancestors include four women  
whose stories cast them in a rather unsavory light.  
Since biblical genealogies  
typically only recorded male ancestors,  
Matthew's departure from the norm is something we need to pay attention to.

The four women are Tamar,  
Rahab  
Ruth and  
Bathsheba.

The Hebrew Scriptures recount  
that Tamar was a Canaanite  
twice widowed  
of two brothers!  
Her father in law  
tried to evade his obligation to provide for her.  
Out of desperation,  
she prostituted herself with him—  
then gave birth to Perez  
who became an ancestor of Jesus.  
Her vulnerability and ingenuity  
were Providential vehicles  
that brought the Messiah to birth.

Rahab, an Egyptian harlot  
was the epitome of a social outcast.

Despite her disreputable status,  
Rehab played a key role in the story of the Jewish people.  
When Joshua sent two spies to explore the city of Jericho,  
Rahab risked her life to hide them and ensure their safety.  
Later she married one of the spies and gave birth to Boaz  
an ancestor of King David.  
Her marginalization and courage  
were Providential vehicles  
that brought the Messiah to birth.

Ruth was a Moabite,  
a foreigner,  
and a widow  
who chose to faithfully companion her mother in law, Naomi  
rather than return to the security of her own people.  
Ruth's love and commitment to Naomi  
were justified in the end.  
She married Naomi's relative,  
and became the great grandmother  
of King David.  
Her powerlessness and fidelity  
were Providential vehicles  
that brought the Messiah to birth.

Named in Matthew's Gospel only as "Uriah's wife,"  
Bathsheba committed adultery with David,  
who to cover their treachery,  
had her husband killed.  
She later became the mother of Solomon.  
Her weakness  
was a Providential vehicle  
that brought the Messiah to birth.

These are not the stereotypical dutiful,  
devout Matriarchs  
set forth to be honored on a pedestal.  
Rather, they are women of questionable morals.  
They are foreigners.  
They are without social status or standing.  
They are the marginalized.  
And they were chosen to be Providential vehicles  
which brought the Messiah to birth.

They were Jesus' ancestors,  
publicly named  
for all times  
in His family tree,  
witnesses to God's Providence in adversity.  
witnesses to God's Providence in blessings.

A contemporary depiction of His family tree,  
of Matthew's genealogy  
is the cover of your worship aid.  
It is one of the Illuminations from the St. John's Bible.  
The tree is represented by the Menorah.  
The names of Jesus' ancestors  
are boldly written in English and Hebrew.

The artist,  
like the gospel writer,  
has taken some liberties  
in sketching that tree.

Recorded at the base,

are the names of Abraham,  
Isaac and Jacob—  
and also their wives—  
Sarah,  
Rebecca,  
Leah and Rachel.  
Significantly,  
Hagar, Abraham's concubine  
and her son, Ishmael—an ancestor of Mohammed  
are inscribed in Arabic.

The imagery comes from sources across the world  
as the illumination is intended to be a stepping-stone  
from the Old Testament to the New.  
It attempts to illustrate the oneness of past and present.  
It implies a kinship with other spiritual traditions.  
There are Islamic style candles,  
fragments from the Buddhist visual tradition.  
A mandala is incorporated into the base of the menorah,  
a sign of cosmic unity and wholeness.

Perhaps more striking than these abstract elements  
are the stamps of a double spiral helix,  
the contemporary symbol of identity fixed by DNA.  
The illumination is an illustration of the truth—  
that all people  
of any time and tradition  
can be vehicles,  
channels  
instruments of God's Providence.

The Gospel text and the illumination

both emphasize the Incarnation—  
God taking on humanity in the person of Jesus.

And humanity  
as we know too well  
is not characterized by perfection.

We,  
you and I,  
our families  
our friends,  
our church,  
our communities,  
are often flawed,  
are sometimes broken,  
are frequently unpolished,  
are occasionally defective.

None of that is an impediment to God's Providence.  
God chose to come among us  
not as a Royal leader  
not as a wealthy philanthropist  
not as a powerful military conqueror  
not as a sainted sage,  
but as one of the weak,  
one of the vulnerable,  
one of the marginalized.

The shepherds heard an angel choir.  
The magi followed a brilliant star.  
But the Promised One was not among the Angels or the Stars.

Instead, shepherds and Magi found God in a hovel.  
God became  
a fragile,  
helpless  
infant  
who was found lying in an animal's feeding trough.

God came to dwell with us in weakness.  
God came to dwell with us in vulnerability.  
God came to dwell with us who are powerless.  
God came to dwell with us who are marginalized.

This is how our ever Provident God chooses  
to be among us still.  
Emmanuel, God with us  
dwells within each of us—  
God makes a home among the very realities,  
God makes a home among the very people,  
that the world would cast aside.

This night  
we are called to embrace our humanity  
with all of its imperfections  
with all of its vulnerabilities  
with all of its limitations  
and become Providential vehicles of the God  
who still chooses to dwell among us.

This is the good news of our shared ancestry!