

Isaiah 2:1-5 ~ Matthew 1:1-17  
 From Generation to Generation...There's Room for Every Story<sup>i</sup>  
 First Sunday of Advent ~ November 27, 2022  
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*Introduction to Scripture Reading*

On this past Thanksgiving weekend, my husband Bob and I finally got to watch the movie "Top Gun: Maverick" the 2022 sequel to the 1986 "Top Gun" original American action film. Thirty-six years later, still a thriller, we were on the edge of our seats, cheesy though it may be. But we like cheese in Wisconsin, don't we? Setting aside the curiously vampirish ability of Tom Cruise to barely exhibit the natural aging process that thirty-six years renders on all the rest of us, I am bringing this movie to your attention today for another reason. Not because I am asking you to think of Jesus as a "Top Gun" nor because we are called to be "Mavericks" for the Messiah, but simply because this Hollywood film is a sequel. Something like the way Matthew chooses to frame his gospel. He begins his whole gospel with two words, "*biblos geneleos*" that literally mean the "book of Genesis" in the Greek. Matthew wants to tip us off right at the top, that in the birth of Jesus Christ, God has made a new beginning. The Gospel According to Matthew could be billed as "Genesis II, the Sequel." <sup>ii</sup>

Starting from Abraham, Matthew traces the genealogy of Jesus, from generation to generation. Behind each of these names are stories, told and untold. Stories that twist and turn and hang by a thread. Once by a crimson cord. For our purposes today, I will set up this reading (which I would not inflict on any Lector) by inviting you to notice the *untidiness* of Jesus' lineage. Matthew took an unusual and notable leap from tradition by including four women, non-Jews, and you might say, morally questionable characters, among Jesus' ancestors: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the "wife of Uriah," aka Bathsheba. Leading up to the fifth woman, Jesus' unwed teenage mother, Mary. He wants us to realize from the word "go" that Jesus comes from a Jewish line that already includes "outsiders." Not just any outsiders: Women who colored outside the lines, asserting their limited status and power to bring about God's divine purposes. I think the untidiness of Jesus' lineage can help us to relate to him as a human being. Even in Jesus' family tree, we can see how God grafts families together in different and unexpected ways: blended families, families by adoption, formal or informal.

So, as we begin our first gospel reading on this first Sunday of Advent (also the first Sunday of our Christian liturgical year), may these names and the stories told, retold, and untold, take flight in your imaginations and hearts. (No pilot's license needed.) These folks are our ancestors, our people. Their stories are part of our stories. So tell us Grandpa Matthew, from whom do we come?

### *Sermon*

My given middle name is "King" – my mom's family name before she was married to my dad, Ed Brubaker. We now have a granddaughter named "Lillian King" born in 2021, carrying forward both her great grandmother's name on my side, and on Bob's side. His grandmother's first name was Lillian. Names help to connect the generations. They contain multitudes: stories we tell at the dinner table, or maybe at bedtime. Others maybe when we are driving along, side by side. And the stories that are just too difficult to tell face-to-face. Like when my mom found out about a sister, she didn't know she had. Until she was ten years old, sitting in the back seat of her parents' car. My mom, thinking she was so clever as ten-year-olds will do, declared, "I am your favorite daughter!" She said this because she thought she was their only daughter, until right then, her dad told her as he was driving along, "Well actually you had a sister named Dorothy who died at childbirth." Then she learned the sad story. An important one. My mom would likely never have been born, if her older sister Dorothy had lived. And then of course, none of her four children would have been born, including me, her fourth child.

Our lives hang on a thread, in so many ways. And yet somehow, here we are today. By God's grace upon grace. On top of that: It's crazy to think about how we are all connected to a family tree. As geneticist Spencer Wells explains in his TED Talk<sup>iii</sup> how DNA serves as a historical document leading geneticists to construct a family tree that includes every living person. In the talk he went further, "if we go far enough back, we share a common ancestry with every living thing on earth. DNA ties us all together, so we share ancestry with barracuda and bacteria and mushrooms, if you go far enough back—over a billion years." Apparently, something happened about 60,000 years ago. The human population crashed all the way down to less than 2,000 people on the whole earth. Yes: Homo sapiens were close to being wiped out. No one knows the whole story, but part of it was environmental: It was at the worst part of the ice age. All humanity lived in Africa at that point. We are here today, in part, because our ancestors in Africa roared back, building social networks, finding ways to adapt, work together, build. Ancient plowshares and pruning hooks, working the land, as never before. Hope roared back. After hanging by a thread. And here we are.

Who were the markers of hope in your story? Let's begin at the beginning of your story. My Good News today is this: There is room right now for you and your story. Starting with your name. Right in the middle of this sermon, there is room for you to turn to a person near you, to your left or your right. Move if you need to. Because there is room in this sermon for 2 minutes in which I invite you to share your first and middle name with that person, and a story or stories about those names. Do they come from family before you? Is there someone in the next generation who has been named after you? Do you have another name or nick name that is part of your story. If you are worshipping remotely by yourself, or reading this sermon: use these 2 minutes, to talk to God about your first and middle names: what stories do they tell you about your history and your future? ... That wasn't too hard, was it? I pray we will make this advent a season of storytelling. Ask your grandparents. Tell your grandchildren. Whether they are related to you by blood or friendship. Plow the soil of your family tree. Let's claim our connections by sharing stories. This work is life giving – it can even be lifesaving, I believe.

We have all just come through a deadly week of seven mass shootings in seven days across our land. The hurt and the trauma go deep and wide from the epicenter of each of these shootings in widening circles across our nation. Our human family tree was scarred and maimed. Again. We wonder how safe it really is to go shopping, to the movies, to a nightclub, or to send our children to school. We look for causes and long for this epidemic of violence to stop. Although we can't possibly know the full story behind each of these mass shootings and the ones that came before, there is a common thread. These young men with guns all seem to share a common problem: social isolation. Young adult men unhinged, disconnected, alone, hopeless. They had come to the point where there saw no room for their story in the life they were living.

Could the church have been a community where these lost souls and others withering on the vine from isolation might find hope and love and life? Do you wonder sometimes about the future of Christianity? I do. Yet even asking the question can seem dangerous for those of us who love Christ and have for generations. When we step back and think about what is being passed down from generation to generation, we wonder what the church will become in another generation or two. If you consider the future of Christianity as bleak and hopeless: churches closing right and left, our grown children raised in the church not choosing to participate as we have done, Brian D. McLaren finds hope in the very core of our shared story. He reminds us that our story from its beginnings, as Matthew's genealogy of Jesus reminds us, our story of faith has always been an ever-evolving movement.

He writes, "For centuries, Christianity has presented itself as an "organized religion"—a change-averse institution . . . that protects and promotes a timeless system of beliefs that were handed down fully formed in the past. Yet Christianity's actual history is a story of change and adaptation. We Christians have repeatedly adapted our message, methods, and mission to the contours of our time. What might happen if we understand the core Christian ethos as creative, constructive, and forward-leaning—as an "organizing religion" that challenges all institutions (including its own) to learn, grow, and mature toward a deepening, enduring vision of reconciliation with God, self, neighbor, enemy, and creation?"<sup>iv</sup>

Isn't that why Jesus came to earth and why we came to church today? Isaiah's vision of turning swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, can lead us into the light this advent. What land in your heart needs to be plowed, turned over, refreshed and made new? What parts of your life, your attitude, need pruning? Consider what daily acts of generation or regeneration (birth or rebirth) God is calling you to do this Advent.

We started with Jesus' genealogy that helped us look back. I will end with a poem to help us with our story right now. It is a poem for you and for me by Sarah (Are) Speed) titled, "Room," a poem infused with honesty and Advent hope. May it be your prayer:

*I asked God—what about my  
fingernail-biting habit  
or the way I leave all the cabinets  
open in the kitchen?*

*What about the way I can  
be dramatic,  
drumming up a fight, only to  
hand out apologies like souvenirs?*

*What about the way I second-guess myself,  
let shame drive, or stay quiet when I  
have something to say?*

*What about the way I chase accomplishments  
like a dog with a bone?*

*What about the doubt, or the fact  
that I'm terrible at prayer and  
cannot help but yawn during church?*

*What about  
What about  
What about?*

*My baggage might be too big for the van.  
But then God called me by my first and middle name,  
which always means business,  
and said: who told you that you were too much?  
Sugar, there is so much room for you here.*

*So that's when I grabbed a seat  
and we hit the road and I knew right then  
that the rumors were true.*

*There is room.  
There is room.  
There is room.*

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<sup>i</sup> "From Generation to Generation" Advent theme was created by A Sanctified Art LLC, sanctifiedart.org.

<sup>ii</sup> The idea about Matthew's chapter 1 as a sequel came from Douglas R.A. Hare, *Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox: Louisville, KY, 1993), p. 7.

<sup>iii</sup> TED talk: "A Family Tree for Humanity" by Spencer Wells, August 18, 2008

<sup>iv</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian* (New York: Convergent, 2016), 3.