

Son of David, Son of Abraham
Matthew 1:1-17

To say that this country is divided is the most extreme of understatement. The two political parties have been at each other's throats for years, not just over how much money to spend on what sorts of projects or programs, but now over diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive issues such as school choice, abortion, same-sex marriage, and the right to keep and bear arms. Half the country wants to impeach the President, and the other half wants him to remain in office. Everyone is too busy shouting at one another to really know what the other side is saying. Are there even any adults in the room?

Well, believe it or not, this long list of names is the ultimate answer to such clamor and chaos. For at the very beginning of his gospel, Matthew makes two sweeping assertions that the following genealogical record then goes on to prove. He says that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of David. And he says that Jesus is the son of Abraham.

But why is that such good news? And how can these facts about Jesus possibly help to heal the fundamental divisions in American politics and culture?

Let's begin with the expectations that the people in Matthew's days had about the coming of the Christ, which is the Greek word for the Messiah. Messiah, in turn, is a Hebrew word describing the Anointed One, the Ruler God had promised to send to govern His people. In the selections from the prophets found in our responsive reading, we find general agreement that the Messiah would come from David's line, or as Jeremiah described Him, "a righteous branch" on David's family tree. And since David was the son of Jesse, we also find Isaiah describing this Son of David as "a shoot from the stump of Jesse."

And that, in fact, is the main point of Matthew's genealogical record. For this list of names demonstrates that Jesus was in fact descended from the line of kings that stretched from David to Jeconiah and his brothers, the dynasty that ruled over what came to be called Judea for over 400 years – to put that in perspective, that's the entire length of American history, from the settlement of Jamestown to the present. Matthew is making clear that Jesus was in fact the legitimate heir to David's throne, the rightful King of the Jews.

And why did that matter so much to the people of Matthew's time? Because of what all the prophets said this divinely anointed Ruler would do once He ascended the throne. Isaiah said that He would rule with perfect wisdom and understanding. Isaiah said He would not rely on what His senses tell Him, but instead make righteous judgments, decisions that always line up with God's Word and God's will.

Doesn't having that sort of a king sound good? It sure would have to some of the people on Matthew's list. In verse 3 we are reminded of the story of Tamar, who had to trick her father-in-law Judah into providing her with a son that could support her. In verse 6, we recall the story of Bathsheba and how King David took advantage of his power to seduce her and then kill her husband. No, the modern #MeToo movement has no monopoly on women who need a righteous ruler to punish powerful people who neglect them or abuse them. And that's exactly what Isaiah said the Messiah would do – that the very breath of his lips would slay the wicked, and that He would provide for and protect the meek of the earth.

So, what else did Isaiah say about this Messiah? Unlike David, or any of the other kings Matthew includes on his list, Isaiah said that the Messiah would rule over the whole world, not just the Kingdom of Israel or Judah. Even the islands, the coastlands where the Philistines lived, would pay attention to His law. He would bring forth justice even to the Gentiles, to all the unbelieving nations of the world.

And that would be good news to the Gentiles who are included in Matthew's list. Verse 5 reminds us that one of David's ancestors was Rahab, a pagan prostitute who lived in Jericho but who subsequently transferred her allegiance to the Hebrew invaders. The same verse reminds us of the story of Ruth – although she had been born a Moabite, she sought the protection of the God of Naomi and Boaz and became David's great-grandmother. Truly, in Jesus Christ, our God is the God of all the nations.

And that means that one day Christian pastors won't have to worry about being locked up in Turkish prisons for preaching the gospel. One day, Christians won't have to fear ISIS thugs beheading them on Libyan beaches. One day, Christians won't have to worry about godless governments tearing down their places of worship or compelling them to celebrate ungodly marriages or forcing them to allow their employees to kill their unborn children. For one day the Messiah will rule over all the world, executing perfect justice and righteousness in the land.

But that, of course, points to the biggest question that today's passage raises – since Jesus has already come, why are we still waiting for all the benefits of His reign that the prophets described? After all, this genealogy makes it clear that Jesus was the rightful ruler of His people. He, not Herod, should have been living in the palace in Jerusalem.

But as we learn later in this gospel, Jesus was not, in fact, born in the palace, and his father Joseph was not, in fact, the king of Judea. And none of Joseph's ancestors since the Babylonian conquest had been kings either. So, for all practical, common-sense purposes, Matthew's genealogy of Jesus didn't make any real difference to the people of Judea at the time Jesus was born, because pretenders to the throne have no real power. I mean, there are still descendants of Bonnie Prince Charlie around today, people who some would say are the rightful heirs to the throne of the United Kingdom, but I doubt Queen Elizabeth is very worried about any of them taking her job.

And let's face it – that's the main reason that Jesus' own people eventually turned on Him. For instead of leading them in a rebellion against the Romans, Jesus allowed the Romans to arrest Him. And that's why after He was crucified, people said they would only believe He was the Messiah if He would come down from the cross. They only wanted a Messiah who would do right then what all the prophets had promised he would do. They simply couldn't believe a dead King could do them any earthly good.

And that's the same reason why so many people reject the claims of Christ even today. For no matter how clear the Biblical record may be, no matter how obvious it is that Jesus was the One to Whom the prophets all pointed, many people just aren't interested in Jesus if He won't bless them the way they think He should, and according to their timetable. If Jesus isn't going to heal their bodies and their bank accounts, if He isn't going to give them the worldly peace and prosperity they want, they have no use for Him.

But that's why it's so important that Matthew also claims that Jesus is the Son of Abraham. For if David reigned over the land God had promised to Abraham, and if David reigned as king over all the descendants God promised that Abraham would have, Abraham never saw any of those promises fulfilled. No, at the time Abraham died, he only owned a piece of land large enough to be his family burial plot. And he only had one legitimate son, Isaac, who was married but hadn't given Abraham any grandchildren yet.

And at the time Jesus was crucified, He had even less worldly success than Abraham had. Jesus had spent three years pouring his teaching and experience into His twelve disciples. They had all confessed that He was the Messiah, and they had all performed miracles in His name. But at the time He was arrested, one of them had betrayed Him, another one denied Him, and all of them abandoned Him. Jesus knew what all the prophets said, and He claimed that He was the Anointed King they all predicted would come. But as He gave up His life on the cross, He had no followers, and the only crown He had was made of thorns.

And that meant that, just like His ancestor Abraham, Jesus had to live and die in faith. He had to trust God's Word that didn't make sense all the time. He had to rely on promises that hadn't yet been fulfilled. And all too often, so do we. Even after the coming of our Messiah, we still wait for many of the blessings that the prophets describe. Whenever we turn on the news, we long for a righteous ruler, who will govern impartially, protecting the weak and punishing the wicked, putting an end to all our squabbling. We long for all the world to bow the knee to Christ and obey His perfect law of love, even as we continue to trust Him and follow Him as best we can.

But Jesus still refuses to bully people, exerting His power in the way the people of Matthew's time wanted Him to. And that's because He didn't come to start a political revolution – instead, as Isaiah said, He doesn't even exert enough force to tear a blade of grass that has already been bent. At this time, He isn't going to snuff out even a smoking candle's wick. For the primary focus of His first coming was not to change our world but to change our hearts.

But the good news is that, in living such a faithful life and in dying such a faithful death, Jesus in fact received all the blessings God promised to Abraham and to David. For it was only in making such a perfect sacrifice, laying down His life to pay the penalty that all our sins deserve, that He is able to be the Savior of all those who share the faith of Abraham, the Savior even of Gentiles like Rahab and Ruth and most of us. It is because Jesus took on Himself all the sin of the world that God is able to forgive even spectacular sinners like Jesus' ancestors David and Ahaz and Manasseh, even unworthy, helpless sinners like all of us.

And because Jesus rose from the dead, He has in a spiritual sense already fulfilled all that the prophets said about the Messiah. In Him, as Malachi said, the sun of righteousness has already risen with healing in His wings. In fact, no matter how crazy and chaotic this world may seem to be, Jesus already rules and reigns over every king and kingdom. His Word already condemns the wicked in every land. His Kingdom already includes people from every tribe and nation, even as His praise ascends in every language from every corner of the world.

Now, it is true that one day Jesus will return in all His glory and majesty. One day He will stamp out all opposition to His righteous rule, making obvious to everyone the authority He already possesses. But even though that great Day of Judgment hasn't yet come, Jesus is still the Son of David, Whose Word deserves to be obeyed all over the world. Jesus is still the Son of Abraham, the savior of all who will trust in Him, even though we can't yet see the salvation He has promised.

So, no matter what may be going on in our lives and our world today, let us trust in Him. And let's join the angels who already see His glory, giving praise to our Lord and King as we sing all the stanzas of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing."