

The men are one thing; the women, quite another. (Matthew 1:1-17)

It is good to know the family stories - the funny ones and the tragic ones; this is why we live where we live (or why we don't live there any more...). These stories are used to justify positions of power (like kings and emperors) They help us understand who will take over the family business, or who is likely to have children with red hair. And Jesus family story does some of that.

For that is what this is - this list of names that we have at the beginning of Matthew's gospel - the rough outline of Jesus family story. There are a lot of familiar names in this list: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob...and of course, these women.

There are rough spots in the story - some relatives whose story is...a little sketchy. Tamar and Rahab and Ruth. Foreigners - those not of "our tribe" but still worthy of mention BECAUSE they are 'from away' as they say down East. The story of Jesus includes misfits and vagabonds...the story is not easily told all the time...and that is our story too.

We are not (many of us) inclined to trace our histories back to the 14th generation (never mind 42 generations!) we make our connections and tell our stories in many different ways these days. We have lists of friends - contact lists on phones and computers - address books (some of us) to help with the Christmas cards and birthday and anniversary notices - all these things help to tell our personal (and family) stories. Some of which are easy to tell, and others. Not so much - and eventually, those stories move closer and closer together - they overlap and intertwine, until they start to look like one story. I am fascinated by how our stories run together - and by how, in our faith traditions - we strive to connect ourselves to the story of God's family. And that's what I see when I read this list of names.

Hard to pronounce - difficult to trace - impossible to verify these connections (the records are lost if they ever existed) but still, the stories we tell to make those connections bring us closer together, and closer (by association) to God.

These names in Matthew's gospel - most of them mean nothing to us. A really dedicated student of the bible will recognize maybe 20 of them, but even that can be a problem...but think about the names that surround you. Last week our family added more names to the list of people we call relatives - Erik and his parents - his brother - grandparents and uncles and cousins. I was managing to keep them (mostly) straight in my head when one of Lea's cousins sent a message that welcomed Erik to the Dowson family...which is the family that Lea grew up in, who welcomed me (and my extended family) when Lea and I were married...and so the connections now go even further.

These names have the effect of connecting the whole world to Jesus. Through all kinds of families (careful here); through well-known names and strange, forgotten ones. These names help me understand how close we are - even to those people who we might think are complete strangers. It makes me wonder why we aren't more careful - more gracious - more understanding of one another.

There is not much between us, really - just these names - each representing its own story; each trying to find some meaning and purpose; each one hungry for the joy, peace, hope and love that God offers.