



Richmond Hill Reflections

“It’s All About Our Roots” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

December 1, 2019; First Sunday of Advent

Reading: Matthew 1:1-17

Today we begin Advent, which means we are getting ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus. But who is he really? This is something we are going to explore these next few weeks and I am going to need some help talking about this this morning. Can I have three younger volunteers?

(Children come forward and hang a globe, a rainbow and a starry night sky on a tree branch.)

This tree is not like those two trees. It isn’t an evergreen. It is deciduous. I chose it so we could see all the branches. I wanted everyone to see them because it isn’t a Christmas tree. It’s a Jesse Tree. The three ornaments represent creation, and so Adam and Eve, a rainbow for Noah and a starry night sky to remind us of Abraham who was told he would have more descendants than all the stars in the sky. During Advent we will put more ornaments on the tree to represent different stories that remind us how much God loves us, and always has, slowly helping us grow. Thanks.

(Children return to their seats.)

Do you know why it is called a Jesse tree? There is a passage in the Book of Isaiah which reads “a bud will sprout from the stump of Jesse; a branch will grow from his roots.” As we heard in our dramatized story, Jesse was the father of King David. Even though he was not a perfect ruler, David was remembered as a model king. When he did wrong, he expressed his sorrow and tried to do better. When after many generations the people fell on hard times, there was a hope that one day there would be ruler like David who’d bring a new age of peace and justice. Christians came to believe Jesus was the one they were waiting for. That is why Matthew tells us about his ancestors the way he does, being sure to trace his lineage back to David, and further to Abraham.

What Matthew gives us is what we call a family tree. We all have one, because we have parents and our parents had parents, and so on. It’s because of them we look like we do. They shape our personality and not just by how we were raised. A few years ago, I was at a wedding in Scotland. I was just being me. At one point I was on the dance floor, a pint in my hand. My aunt shared later that when she saw me, she felt she was watching her father. I took it as a compliment but I’m not sure she meant it that way. We’re also shaped by our ancestors’ experiences. We see this in the ongoing impact of Residential Schools on the children and grandchildren of survivors, the trauma passed down from one generation to the next. The scar that was caused by colonialism also impacts the

Middle East among other places, and violently expressed itself on a bridge in London on Friday. The experiences of even distant relatives shape us.

It's no wonder that family tree sites like ancestry.ca are so popular. We can learn about ourselves by knowing where we came from. And that is what Matthew is doing with his version of Jesus' lineage. He's saying something about his identity, not just in tracing it back to David, but by the people he includes in it. One detail we'll unpack over the next couple of Sundays is that Matthew names five women. It may not be a big deal to us, but would have been a surprise in the time he was writing. There are a lot more men and one is Rehoboam. His father Solomon had been hard on the people and they resented him. Rather than lighten up, when Rehoboam became king he doubled down and made things even more burdensome. There was a revolt and the kingdom split into two, Judah and Israel. Corruption in the monarchy is a constant theme in the scriptures.

In the next couple of weeks we will come across other unsavoury people. The fact that there are sketchy people in Jesus' lineage gives me hope that we all can be redeemed. Case in point, the Ravenscrofts. Growing up I was told we were involved in shipping. When younger, I liked to think this was code for being pirates. We weren't. I ended up with that kind of intrigue from my mom's side where a distant relative was in a gunfight in the wild west. More sobering was learning that shipping meant they transferred loads from oceangoing vessels and took them up the Mersey River to Manchester. The business collapsed when the canal was built, but for a time my family transported cotton, which means they profited, albeit indirectly, from slavery. It felt right to me that it ended. I needed there to be a reset. Knowing Jesus had questionable family members reminds me this is always possible. No one is defined by the past but how we live now.

A reset, also known as redemption, is key to Jesus' identity. The one whose birth we'll celebrate came to seek the lost, to reach out to those that others called irredeemable. He forgave individuals but more than that we believe he's pivotal to our release from the pattern of sin, division, injustice that has shaped human history. The way he did that is more than the cross, but includes it. It high-lights our addiction to power and using violence to hold on to it. This is how Rehoboam defended oppressing his people, how the slave trade flourished, how we justified Residential Schools, how terror attacks happen. But this pattern doesn't get the last word. Redemption means that love does.

This is what we celebrate as we gather at this table. We all need this gift of loving redemption. There is still division, injustice, violence, but at this table, at least for a time, those realities fall away, and we have a glimpse of what the world can be. So, my friends, as we reflect on Jesus' family tree, remember that we're part of it, each of us redeemed and sharing this gift with others. Amen.