



Dr. James C. Howell
Matthew 1:1-17
August 16, 2009

Last week I pointed out how the Old Testament ends with this sentence, *Lest I come and smite you with a curse*, and then the New Testament begins with a long genealogy of begats. I mean, God must be crazy. God needs a better literary agent. God needs some counsel on how to hook us in so that we will love this story. I mean, a curse and a genealogy, oh my goodness. That doesn't sound like a very good idea at all, and I would suggest to you that perhaps this genealogy is, in fact, the perfect and only way for God to begin the story of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Genealogy. This uncovers 42 generations and a span of about 1,800 years. We begin in the middle Bronze Age and then we think about the sweep of history. We move past Ramses The Great and the Great Pharaohs of Egypt, the rise of Assyria and then Babylon, the Persians, then the rise of Alexander the Great and then the Great Roman Empire, through all of these vicissitudes of history, one family in a little backwater country not even the size of the state of Vermont...Think about a genealogy, how huge, how many stimulating stories lie behind this genealogy.

I've thought some about genealogies. I've never spent a lot of time tracing my personal family tree. Howells don't know much about themselves, going far back. Sometimes families keep their family trees in a Bible. I always think that's kind of cool, to keep the names recorded in a Bible. I married – this is interesting – I married into a very fine family, indeed. They know their genealogy way back. They've got a family Bible that traces the Stocktons back into the 1600s. I mean, this is just something. And many fine upstanding citizens, one of the ancestors, a guy named Richard Stockton who hailed from Princeton, New Jersey, he signed the Declaration of Independence. I mean, this is a great family, although I always think family trees are more interesting if you could go back and find a horse thief or a guy that made moonshine back in the woods, that would be a more interesting family. The Howells, you know, we've never had a lot to brag about, although we do have great names. If you're pregnant and you need names to use in addition to these that have been read today....You're rooting for the lay readers, I know. You can use those names or some of the names that have been used among my Howell ancestors. You know, like Zona and Famin and Cropsy and Nezie, these sorts of names among the Howells. Nothing noble there, although I wonder when I went away to Duke, I took a class from a professor who had come over from Great Britain. He had grown up in Wales and as he was calling the roll the first day, he got to my name and he said "James Howell" and I said "Here." He looked up with excitement in his eyes and said "Mr. Howell, you're Welsh." And I said, "No, I'm from North Carolina." I should have said "Yes!" He said, "Are you perhaps a descendant of Hywel Dda. the codifier of the Celtic laws?" That sounded pretty cool. And then he said, "Or perhaps you are a descendant of Howell the bald." And I said, "Oh, I hope not."

Family trees – if you think about it, there are just so many names. So and so begat so and so, begat so and so, and the same is in this room. You're just so many individuals with just so many names. You're sitting behind somebody, there's just a person, but if you think about each person, think of the hugeness of your life. Think about your memories. Think about the web that is you, a web of dreams, and a web of wounds, of achievements, of failures, of loves. So

much resides inside each one of us and inside the person who is in front of you, inside the person that's behind you. How large is each story?

Some of these that have been named, we actually know a lot about – David. David came along – he was so heroic, he was so agile, he was so successful, but then he squandered it all to have a tawdry affair with one of his soldier's wives and he had that soldier killed to try to cover up and in his remorse he felt so bad before God, he pleaded with God for forgiveness, but nothing ever was really any better in his life, and he died very old and very alone.

The story of Hezekiah, he got right to death's door, which in the ancient world just when you got to death's door, you went ahead and died, but somehow, Hezekiah made it 7 more years. How did he feel about those 7 years?

Abraham is somebody who faced so much difficulty in his life, and God required of him a very long faith, a very patient faith over a very long period of heartbreak.

The story of Jacob – Jacob is just one scoundrel and rogue and yet he felt kind of roughed up by God. He had this tangled relationship with God, didn't he? And then the genealogy mentions his sons. You want to talk about a dysfunctional family? You think you come from a crazy family? Some of you, you're about to nod, but you're not sure you should. You think you come from a dysfunctional family. Look at Jacob's family, these brothers. It's just something, isn't it? There are women who are mentioned in this story. Ruth is mentioned. Her young husband died. Her father-in-law died, and everything seemed so hopeless, and they would starve to death. But then rich Boaz came along and married her. So many stories, so many stories, just as each of us gathered here, our lives are just so many stories, and what we call all of that theologically is grace. We call it grace. The life that we have, all that has come to us is the grace of God if we think about it from the perspective of the gift, God's grace. What this genealogy exhibits, I would suggest to you, is divine patience. God is patient.

I was in a meeting the other day and heard a report from various groups within our strategic planning body. So interesting, we have the strategic plan, a lot of you are a part of it and others will be over time. We're doing things, not like, "Hey, what would be a good idea to do tomorrow?" but what is our strategic plan? What are we doing over a long period of time? For instance, we had a great event yesterday where for kids over at South Tryon who were going back to school, they got book bags and book supplies. I tell you that and you're thinking, "That's a very nice thing to do for children, isn't it?" But we're not treating it as a nice thing to do for children. It's part of a strategic plan. What we're asking now is not, "How do you do a nice thing for children, but how do you take a child from the cradle to college? How do you take a child from the cradle to college?" It's not one book bag or one game. It's a whole long-term strategy of how we befriend a child and a family over a long period of time, strategic planning. We're looking at a strategic plan for our faith. You know, for a long time we've thought, if we have children, "Oh, it's a lovely thing to bring our child to church and put them back in Sunday School." That's a nice thing to do now, isn't it? But we're trying to look at a strategic plan. How do you really go from the cradle to adulthood and actually grow in your faith and come to be a faithful disciple of Jesus? Once you're an adult you say, "Well, I went to church when I was

little. I'm done." Or do we continue to grow in our discipleship, in our faith over time? We're taking a strategic plan. How should we say it?

Matthew Chapter 1 tells us that God has a strategic plan. There is a plot to what God is pulling off in history. God is not manipulating every little part of it, but God is working and taking us somewhere. We don't see this so often in our world. What we often see are kind of knee-jerk reactions. Maybe you work for a company, and for a long time what they did was work and then suddenly, "It's not working anymore" and the executives and the board of directors get together and say, "It's not working. What are we going to do now?" Or sometimes it happens in a marriage, doesn't it? You're married and you think things are kind of going along all right and then you look up one day and, oh my goodness. And you have to look at each other and say, "What we're doing isn't working anymore." God never does this. God is constant. God has a plan. God has a long-term strategic plan. God is taking your life, being swept along in the tide of what God is doing in history toward God's good end, the divine patience. God comes to all kinds of people in this genealogy, famous people, kings, great saints, scoundrels, bums, dishonest people, rich people, and poor people. Jesus comes to such people, all kinds. God's grace, as George said so eloquently, is for all people.

I thought about this genealogy, and it seems to me that it's worth contemplating the names that were left out. If you think about this story over 42 generations, I wonder a few things. I wonder, for instance, how many of the mothers at the point that so and so begat so and so, how many of the mothers at precisely that point died in childbirth? Given health care in the ancient world, out of 42 generations, how many women died in childbirth? Ten, 16? We do not know. How many women would love to have been the one to begat that next child but she was infertile or she just had girls, and it was a lovely thing to have girls but in the ancient world, it was only the guys that mattered, and so, there was a mother whose heart was broken. She loved her daughters dearly but because of the society of that day, it was only the boys that really counted. Imagine her heartbreak. Imagine the guys who would like to have been in that story, but something happened along the way. Maybe one was destined to be the next begat but when he was 8 years old he was working in his father's shop and he cut his finger and he got some kind of infection and it just never got better – they didn't have antibiotics back then – and he died – but he would have been the one mentioned. Or perhaps there was a young man and he was on the verge of being married and being the next one to do this begetting, but his country was at war and he went out to represent his country that was at war and he went out to represent his country against the Assyrians or the Babylonians and was felled by some enemy sword, and his name is unmentioned. It's really a way of asking, Why is there so much sorrow in the world? Why is there so much sorrow? Think of the sorrow in this family – why is there so much sorrow in the world?

I received an e-mail this week from a teen-ager. This teenager wrote to me and said, "I've had a hard year at my age. In the past year, three of my peers have died." And I thought about it – I knew her – I could name two of those teenagers – the third I didn't know about but she told me that story as well. The question that she asked in the e-mail was this. She said, "Is it the case that everything happens for a reason and that God appoints the hour of our death? Or do people die from more accidental reasons and God is just there to love us?" I responded by saying "Everything happens for a reason, but the reason is not that God looks down at a 19-year-old

who is in the prime of life and about to do great things and God says “Death, death, I will break the hearts of this person's family and friends, just death” – no, I'm sorry. The God that is portrayed in the Scripture is not a killer. God does not sow cancer cells. God does not cause car accidents. God does not do us harm. God loves us. When there is suffering and death, God's heart is the first heart to break. It's why God came down in the person of His son Jesus to this family that had experienced so much sorrow. He came down to love them, to share their grief with them and ultimately to redeem them for all of eternity. Everything happens for a reason, but the reason is our bodies are fragile and it's dangerous down here. It's dangerous to get in a car. It's dangerous to go out in the world. God does not manipulate everything or put some shell of insulation around us. God, like a parent, sends us out into the world, not clutching to us and holding us back with the risk that it is dangerous and that there will be sorrow in our lives.

Sometimes history can help us. We think back through all of this genealogy when they didn't have any antibiotics. Doctors then probably did more harm than good. But these people throughout history who didn't have antibiotics, whose mothers died in childbirth, they grieved as heavily as we grieve over loss, but they never looked and said, "There can't be a God because of this." Instead, they saw that whatever life they had was a precious gift from God not to be squandered, not to be wasted, and they took whatever life they had left, and they offered it up and believed that God would carry them forward. It is all grace, isn't it?

My daughter, Sarah, was home for a couple of nights this past week and, in the course of one conversation, we got to talking about her extraordinary bad luck with cars. She gets a car and it's just wrecked after awhile and not her fault. One day she drove to work – she never drives to work – one day literally, she drove to work, she's in the building, a driver falls asleep, plows in, totals her car. There we go. She has bad luck with cars. One night, it actually wasn't funny, she was driving, and there was a drunk driver who was going too fast and didn't pay attention to a stop sign, plowed into my daughter's car. One second earlier, she would not be alive, but it came a second late. She told me that after this happened, people came to her and said "Oh, God must have some very special purpose for your life," but Sarah thought about this and said, "That can't be the right way to think about it" because we had not long before that accident talked about a young woman that we had known who was Sarah's age when Sarah had her accident. Her name was Molly. She, like our summer interns that we just sent off, was our summer intern at my church in Davidson, a wonderful young woman. Her plan was to go to seminary and to go into the ministry. She was in our church every day, and we sent her off, as we are sending our interns off today. She came by my office and said good-bye and she got in the car and on I-40 on her way back to Chapel Hill for her junior year in college, a car did not come one second late, and she was killed. Would you say God didn't have some special purpose for her life? Of course, God had a special purpose for her life. God had a special purpose for my daughter's life. God has a special purpose for every one of our lives. Even if you've never been in a fender-bender, the message is that when we have a brush with death, it is an opportunity to say, "God has put me here for a reason. The grace of God is the palpable reality that matters. I can't just ignore that and live this two-bit life and hope that everything goes OK." When we have a brush with death, we realize that we're vulnerable. We realize that being tender matters. We realize that at the end of the day, love is the only thing; the belief in God is what will see us through.

Thinking about the genes in Jesus' family – it's interesting to see Eunice Shriver dying this week – see pictures of Eunice Shriver and you see that Kennedy face that we've seen so often from so many people who have died even before her. We all have genes that lead us somewhere. Here's the Howell mug – see this? A bunch of other Howells, this is what we look like. Howell men, gray hair prematurely, but it's hooked on, so it's all right. It's the Howell genes. We have genes. I talked to a doctor a number of years ago who was actually a researcher in genetics, and he told me something that just made my jaw drop. He said that if we could really study all of our genes that the whole truth about us could be known. If we could look at your genes we could tell you're likely to die in your 40s or you'll probably live on into your 90s, you're likely to get colon cancer or you're more likely to get emphysema. We're wired in a certain way. Isn't that something? And you think about Jesus' genealogy, there is this gene pool. What did those people look like? What was their proclivity to disease? Was their hair hooked on or were they bald? We do not know these things but genes, at the end of the day, seem to determine us because the most interesting name in the genealogy, I think it's Uzziah, we hear about Uzziah. The other time it is mentioned is at the beginning of Isaiah where it says *In the year that King Uzziah died*, it's a story of births, but the story of births is always the story of deaths. Every one of those who was begotten at the end of the day died. At the end of the day there was a loss. Jesus came down with a certain kind of genetic makeup but he was not at the end of the day finally defined by that. He did die but God raised him from the dead so that we would not finally be defeated by whatever it is that is in us and the way that we are wired. God raised Him up so that we, too, would be raised up to have eternal life with Christ.

Last thing is this, when I think about this family tree, Jesus' genealogy, our family trees, and our lives, it's something to think about, memory. Inside each one of our minds, inside each one of our hearts, there is a rich treasury of memory, and I think the point of the genealogy is that God looks down at each one of us and all of our memories, and the memories that if we could, we would hear again from our parents or from our grandparents or from our great grandparents, all of those memories, God reaches down and God puts God's powerful loving arms around it all. If you could remember your life, what would you see there, if you could remember your life? Maybe you go through an old photo album, you hear an old song, you chat with an old friend, you visit with some older family member, you just remember your life and what you begin to notice there, it's just everything, isn't it?

There are moments of great beauty and there are moments of great darkness, there are moments of heartbreak, there are moments of great delight, and they are always related to each other, aren't they? I think about when my grandfather died, our grief was so intense at that point, but our grief was intense, not because he had led a bad life. Our grief was so intense it was because he had lived such a good life because there had been so much love.

We look back on our lives and there are decisions that we have made that were really smart or were really lucky and there are other decisions that we've made that if we could take them back, we would give all that we have to be able to re-do some moment, some dumb turn. All of our memories are known to God. How do we offer that up to God? Is God just seeing the good memories? And then God puts God's arms around all of it, that we might recall the mistakes, the joys, the achievements, the failures, the wounds, the dreams, it is all carried in the heart of God and that is grace.

At a funeral a few years ago, a man had died far too young. Family and friends gathered for the service at a funeral home. We tried our best to be positive, but it was one of those services where people generally look at their feet and don't have a lot to say. No laughter really, so much sorrow. The service began and we sang a hymn although nobody really sang the hymn, choking back tears, words not really audible. We had prayers, I had my little sermon, and it came time for the closing hymn. The family had asked that we sing "Amazing Grace" and we began singing "Amazing Grace" but no one was really singing, muffled notes, but then suddenly we heard one voice that soared above everyone else's. A voice that was distinct, a voice that was clear, a voice that was downright loud with conviction. We looked up from our hymnals and who was it? It was the widow of this man who had died too young. And the point at which we began to hear her was when she looked up and sang, "Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home." You see that it is grace that has brought us safe thus far, that God's grace surrounds every memory. God's grace loves and heals every mistake, every hurt, every lovely moment, every laugh that has ever passed from our lips.

I'll close with this, Thomas Merton once said this, and it means a lot to me: "Faith is not a matter of getting a bulldog grip on God and not letting the devil pry us loose. No, faith is a matter of letting go rather than keeping hold." I'm coming to think that God loves and helps best those who are so beat and have so much nothing when they come to die that it is almost as if they had persevered in nothing but had gradually lost everything piece by piece until there was nothing left but God. It is a question of His holding onto us by the hair of the head that is from the top where we cannot see or reach. Who can see the top of his own head? When we bow our heads in prayer, God sees the top of our heads and God reaches down and holds us.

I want us to end this service by singing "Amazing Grace" and as we sing it, I would invite you, if you feel so led, to come forward and to kneel at this altar where dozens and dozens of people have done this already this morning. Come and kneel and the top of your head will be turned toward God and God will reach down and to whatever it is that is in you, God will reach down and God will bless you. God will heal you. God will forgive you. God will love you. For it is all grace.