

Before the Birth

The Rev. Dr. Porsha Williams Gates '24



Matthew 1:1–17

¹ *An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

² *Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, ⁴ and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of King David.*

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, ⁷ and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, ⁸ and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, ⁹ and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ¹⁰ and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, ¹¹ and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

¹² *And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³ and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴ and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵ and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus, who is called the Messiah.*

¹⁷ *So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.*

Reflection

Long before there are angels or wise men or the wonder of a birth, the Gospel of Matthew begins with names. A list. Seventeen verses long. To some, that might seem like an odd way to begin the story of Jesus. But the naming itself is sacred. It's not filler. It's intentional information for what will become the formation of Christ. This Gospel doesn't start with spectacle; it begins with memory.

As a child, I would often look at texts like this and skip over them. Get me to the good part! But what I didn't realize then, and what I know now, is that this is the good part. With adult wisdom, I have learned that reading this genealogy is to feel the weight of one's legacy. It's a call and response between generations. It's a litany of survival. Each name is a signpost, reminding us that Jesus does not arrive from nowhere. He comes from a people and an established legacy.

And then, unexpectedly, come the women. Tamar. Rahab. Ruth. The wife of Uriah. Mary. They are not accessories to the narrative, but rather, they are anchors to the genealogy. Each of them navigated systems not built for their flourishing, and yet, here they are. Women, woven into the story of God, disrupt notions that the divine feminine is easily discarded. The women, too, are present right alongside the names of kings, refugees, betrayers, and the faithful. Each of them counted for the record.

Matthew's genealogy is not just about the bloodline that Jesus is born into but how naming and record keeping is a way of sacred storytelling of survival. I think back to my grandma's Bible. Stuffed between the pages are obituaries from loved ones who have joined the great cloud of witnesses. My mother, too, has her Bible, stuffed with obituaries. Now I, too, have a Bible stuffed with obituaries. This stuffing isn't just a matter of collecting. It curates a sacred space to remember those who came before us and presents a record of their existence.

This, too, is part of Advent: the slow and intentional act of remembering. Not just looking forward to what is coming but honoring the holy that has already been. In remembering the names for the record, we also make space for our own stories to exist and to be added to the list.

Prayer

God of sacred memory, You move through generations; remind us that You were ever present with our kin. In this season of longing, waiting, and anticipating, remind us that we, too, are part of the unfolding story for the future generations to come. Make us whole as we honor the stories that shaped us, the precious memories that formed us, the flesh of our humanity that holds us. May we recall the names of our ancestors for the record to remind us that we stand in a sacred lineage of believers and people who trusted You. As You were with them, be with us, also. Amen.