

Sermon: Where we have been and where we are going

The celebration of an anniversary reminds us that Christian people living in the midst of the world's history are usually simultaneously looking forward to our future and backward to our history. Our look back at one hundred and seventy one years of this congregation's life gives us courage and hope for a long, healthy future.

I've chosen a text that marks a similar turning point in the Bible: the opening seventeen verses of Matthew and of the New Testament, the beginning of the collected writings of the Christian Church. This seems like a strange text for a sermon: seventeen verses of names — who was the father of whom for forty-two generations.

It's a passage that's never included in a lectionary, seldom read in a worship service, and omitted or drastically abridged in most Bible readers and story books. It seems like mere background information. But in Matthew's understanding of the gospel, and in the logic of the New Testament canon that places Matthew's gospel first, this genealogy is the proper beginning for the story of Jesus. Why is Jesus' family history so important at this juncture in the Bible?

Jesus' genealogy serves two purposes. First, it tells readers just who Jesus was. The original readers of this gospel were Jewish people, who Matthew believed could best understand Jesus if they knew how he fit into their history. "You know who Abraham was," he says, "and Isaac and Jacob and David and Solomon. This Jesus, the Christ, is their descendant."

Second, this list of generations told Matthew's readers the meaning of their own history. In Jesus' day, the people of Israel looked to the past for their purpose. They were the people who had been delivered from Egypt, had received the Ten Commandments, and had conquered the Promised Land. But they had become subjects of one foreign empire after another, and they were inclined to see all their glory in the past; they also felt as though God had abandoned them.

In this long genealogy of Jesus, Matthew tells them, “The meaning of your history is not in the past, but in the present. The significance of Abraham and Jacob and David is not that they lived in the ‘good old days’ when God really cared, but that they were forerunners of Jesus.” The importance of Israel’s history, for Matthew, was the outcome toward which it was leading for those forty-two generations: the birth of the Savior.

Matthew’s two reasons for beginning his gospel with Jesus’ genealogy suggest a Christian view of history that shapes our reflections on this anniversary. First, as a church we are formed and identified by our history, by where we have been in our past. And second, the meaning of that history is determined by the future, by where our history is leading us.

Perhaps no institution is more clearly defined by its history than the Church. The Christian faith is based on a collection of writings that dates from antiquity. And the Bible is not only a historic book, but a historical book: it tells the history of God’s dealings with his people.

We read the stories about what God did for his people thousands of years ago: about the birth of Isaac, the burning bush and the parting of the Red Sea, about David and Goliath. We tell the story of the risen Saviour just as it was told the first time, two thousand years back in our history. That ancient word seizes our attention and makes us the people of God.

Our faith is further shaped by the centuries of Christian history since the Bible was written. We make our confession in the words of ancient creeds; we sing hymns hundreds of years old; we practice rites and liturgies older than the languages in which we recite them. And of course on this anniversary we remember the history of this congregation in this community: the generations of your own families who have been born, baptized, married and buried here; the traditions that you have created, and that have in turn made you the people you are.

Today we are proud to say that we are part of that whole history, just as Jesus was part of the history of Israel, all forty-two generations from Abraham on down.

We are all identified by our histories. I was always introduced as Marie's daughter, or Gerry and Mary's grand-daughter. Maybe even once or twice as Jeff and John's sister.

We owe who we are to our past, our heritage, our upbringing and education, our traditions. You and I, and this congregation, are products of where we have been.

Matthew also knew that the past isn't enough. He wanted to correct the vision of those people who always looked to the past for meaning. The real point of all those generations of Israelites, he claimed, was that they were leading up to something that was to follow them. We can learn a lot from the past, but its most important function is to lead us into the future.

Jesus made that plain. He told his disciples to remember what he had done, but he also turned their attention to the future task that his ministry was preparing them for. "Go and be my witnesses," He told them. "Go and work in the vineyard. Go and make disciples." Jesus never let his disciples dwell on what had already been done. Their purpose was not to be found in where they had been, but in where they were going.

Our faith is born and nurtured in a historical experience, in what God has done for us in the past, but it always leads us into the future. As a church today, your anniversary celebration naturally turns your gaze back on your history. But you must let that history be part of your movement into the future. Jesus has commissioned you and sent you into the world with a mission: how will you fulfill it?

You have a responsibility to your young people, to prepare them for what they will face in life. You have a responsibility to your old people, to help meet their needs in a changing world. You have a responsibility to the community around you, to proclaim the good news of salvation and to be examples of Christ's love.

Let the stories of faith, commitment, and service that are told today as we recite the history of this congregation strengthen you, prepare you, and propel you into the next century of your ministry in this place.

And the question “Where are we going?” has a still greater significance, because as Christians we know that our history has an eternal direction, an ultimate goal. In the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ the world has been set toward its final moment, in which it will be both finished and begun anew. We — along with Abraham and Sarah, Boaz and Ruth, Joseph and Mary, and hundreds of generations of the sons and daughters of God — are part of the history that flows into God’s own eternity.

The Church is the first-fruits of the Kingdom of God, the first dawning of God’s presence in the world in our day. Its purpose is both to remember God’s faithfulness, kindness, mercy, and providence through our history up to now, and to move us and our world toward the goal God has given us.

So during this anniversary celebration we stand at a place like the place from which Matthew told the story of Jesus. We look to our history — the history of God’s people, of the Christian Church, of this congregation — remembering who we are and where we have been. And at the same time we look to the future, remembering what we have been put here to do and where we are going. Our history is always leading us somewhere; our glory as God’s children is always yet to come. Amen