

Message for December 13, 2020

The Third Sunday in Advent

John 1:1-14

I imagine that most people just drive by it without even giving it a glance never mind stopping and going in, and what I am referring to is the Willoughby Historical Museum. It is to be found on the Niagara Parkway south of the famed falls and is operated by the Niagara Falls Museum. It is located in what was formerly a one room school house and so it is quite small. Even so, its collection is a good one and is dedicated to preserving the history of the township of Willoughby, which has been swallowed up by the city of Niagara Falls. The museum has all sorts of artifacts going back to the community's earliest days and these include a number of items from the War of 1812 battle of Chippawa which was fought about a kilometre away. I must admit that it was the 1812 artifacts that inspired me to visit the museum in the first place but they are not what had the greatest impact on me.

There was a plaque in the museum that really caught my attention, so much so that when we got home I emailed the museum and asked if they would send me a copy of the words on it which they graciously did. The plaque reads in part:

“We are the chosen. My feeling is that in each family there is one who seems called to find the ancestors, to put flesh on their bones and make them live again, to tell the family story. To me doing genealogy is not a cold gathering of the facts but instead, breathing life into those who have gone before.

We are the story tellers of the tribe. All tribes have one. We have been called as if it were, by our genes. Those who have gone before cry out to us ‘tell our story’. So we do. In finding them, we somehow find ourselves.

It goes beyond just documenting facts. It goes to who I am and why I do the things I do.

So as a scribe called I tell the story of my family.”

These words spoke to me simply because I am one of the story tellers of my tribe. As long as I can remember I have had a keen interest in my family's story and I would probably be shocked if I were to count all of the hours I've spent working on the family tree down through the years. Some people dismiss genealogy as a waste of time; who cares about those who went before us? What does it matter who our ancestors were? But it does matter if only because knowing something about those who have gone before us helps us to better understand ourselves. Indeed whether we like it or not, their lives, for better or worse have an impact on ours. Their influence ranges from the physical characteristics that we inherit to perhaps what country we live in. Truly their story is a part of our story but this isn't just true of us, this is also, as strange as it may sound at first, even true of God himself.

They are very rarely ever read on a Sunday morning but both Matthew and Luke include Jesus' family tree in their gospels. Matthew included it at the very beginning of his gospel and in it he traced Jesus' ancestry through Joseph all the way back to Abraham who was the ancestor of God's chosen people. Matthew did this because even though Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus, he was his legal father and Matthew wanted to make it clear that Jesus was a Jew born of the House of David just as the prophets said the messiah would be. For his part Luke, who put Jesus' genealogy after his baptism, traced Jesus' family tree through Mary all the way back to Adam. Luke did this in order to show that Jesus is ultimately related to everyone in the world and is the saviour of the entire world. Perhaps though you may be wondering; this is all fine and good but what has all of this to do with us or even Christmas itself? The answer quite simply is more than what we may first realize.

I often joke that when people research their family tree they are secretly hoping to discover that they are related to someone famous and perhaps even a king or queen! Sometimes there is someone famous but the reality is that most of our ancestors were people like us; a little bit good, a little bit not so good and usually rather ordinary. And then again some of our ancestors were, how shall I say it, real characters! And so it is with Jesus' family tree.

We know little about most of Jesus' ancestors other than the fathers' names but what we do know about some of them may shock us. Consider Tamar for example. She seduced her former father-in-law, became pregnant and gave birth to one of Jesus' ancestors. We can also think of Rahab who was a Canaanite. She operated what we would call a house of ill-repute in Jericho. When the exodus was coming to an end and the Hebrews were planning to conquer the city, she discovered two of their spies hiding on her premises. Instead of turning them over to the authorities which is what we might expect her to do, she sheltered them and then proposed a deal. In exchange for her protecting them, she suggested that they protect her and her business when they attacked the city. The Hebrews honoured the bargain and she later married a Hebrew named Salmon. Rahab had a child who would become another one of Jesus' ancestors. Moving on we can think of the most famous name in Jesus' family tree, King David. The good news is that David at his best was, as the Bible puts it, "the man after God's own heart". The not-so-good news is that at his worst David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged for the death of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah. To make things even worse Uriah was one of David's closest friends and most loyal supporters.

Truly Jesus' family tree, like everyone else's, has its share of good and not so good characters but my point is this: Tamar, Rahab, David and Bathsheba were Jesus' biological ancestors. Their genes were his and their blood flowed in his veins. Yes, Jesus most certainly is the Word made Flesh and the divine Son of God but Jesus is also fully human too. Born of the Holy Spirit *and* Mary, Jesus is both fully divine and human. Now this of course is a mystery that we can never truly begin to understand or explain

but think about what this means. How easy was it for God, being so holy, righteous and perfect to become a human being with an all so human family tree? It couldn't have been easy at all and this points to the holy wonder of Christmas, that God became one of us and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

While the parallel is far from exact, it would be something like one of us giving up all of our abilities and becoming an ant or some other bug in order to save them. Could we or would we give up all that we have to be born a bug, to live like a bug and die like a bug in order that we might save them? Could we or would we make such a sacrifice? It's not very likely is it unless of course we really, truly loved them. And so it is with God.

It must have been far harder than we can ever imagine for God to become human and be born of Mary with her less-than-perfect family tree but nevertheless this is what God did. He did so simply because he loves us so much. And this is the holy, mysterious wonder that is Christmas. The holy mysterious wonder of Christmas isn't that a virgin conceived and bore a child. Nor is the holy wonder of Christmas that Joseph had faith and believed that the child was fathered by the Spirit. The holy wonder of Christmas isn't the shepherds, the star or the wise men either. Rather the holy mysterious wonder of Christmas is the simple fact that almighty God loves us so much that he willingly became one of us even if that meant becoming a descendant of people such as Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba and David. God *is* love and that is why the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.