

## June 14 2020 – Heritage Sunday

In just a few moments, I'm going to read what is, at first glance, a really boring passage of Scripture. It is mostly a list of names. I will probably pronounce some of them...creatively, rather than correctly. I'm not entirely sure who all of them are, but there's a few familiar names in there. You can make a game of it; see if you can catch the famous ones when I read it.

You may be wondering why I am subjecting you to a long list of mostly unfamiliar names...it's because today, we're reflecting on family and history. Scripture encourages us to think of ourselves as children of God, teaches us that we are God's own people. The apostle Paul and other New Testament authors wrote about us being made into Christ's brothers and sisters, adopted as joint heirs; all that belongs to Jesus, that he receives from God, even his relationship with God, we can inherit that, too. From that perspective, when we read the Bible, we're discovering part of our own family history as part of God's people. And it's a rich and deep and ancient heritage, stretching from Abraham to King David to Jesus, and connecting every faithful Christian right up to today.

So yes – I'm going to read you a list of names. And we don't know much about some of them and may not recognise many of them. But they are – every one of them – part of the people of God, part of God's family in the world, just like us. Let's read together from Matthew 1:1-17:

This is the list of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, a descendant of David, who was a descendant of Abraham.

From Abraham to King David, the following ancestors are listed: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah and his brothers; then Perez and Zerah (their mother was Tamar), Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon, Salmon, Boaz (his mother was Rahab), Obed (his mother was Ruth), Jesse, and King David.

From David to the time when the people of Israel were taken into exile in Babylon, the following ancestors are listed: David, Solomon (his mother was the woman who had been Uriah's wife), Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, Amon, Josiah, and Jehoiachin and his brothers.

From the time after the exile in Babylon to the birth of Jesus, the following ancestors are listed: Jehoiachin, Shealtiel, Zerubbabel, Abiud, Eliakim, Azor, Zadok, Achim, Eliud, Eleazar, Matthan, Jacob, and Joseph, who married Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was called the Messiah.

So then, there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, and fourteen from David to the exile in Babylon, and fourteen from then to the birth of the Messiah.

### Ruth Scripture Reading: Ruth 4:13-22

So Boaz took Ruth home as his wife. The Lord blessed her, and she became pregnant and had a son. The women said to Naomi, "Praise the Lord! He has given you a grandson today to take care of you. May the boy become famous in Israel! Your daughter-in-law

loves you, and has done more for you than seven sons. And now she has given you a grandson, who will bring new life to you and give you security in your old age.” Naomi took the child, held him close, and took care of him.

The women of the neighborhood named the boy Obed. They told everyone, “A son has been born to Naomi!”

Obed became the father of Jesse, who was the father of David.

This is the family line from Perez to David: Perez, Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon, Salmon, Boaz, Obed, Jesse, David.

### **Message: Family Trees**

I have noticed lately that I’ve accumulated a fairly respectable stack of Bibles. About fifteen, unless I’ve got another one tucked away somewhere that I’ve forgotten about.

All different versions and shapes and sizes;  
a couple of little New Testaments,  
too many big clunky study Bibles.

Even a really old one, that’s been passed down for generations among the women on my mother’s side of the family.

And I still have my first grown-up Bible  
– a King James version that my parents got me  
when I memorised my multiplication tables, age 12.

One thing that only a few of my Bibles have  
– and maybe you’ve got a bible at home like this –  
it’s those pages for listing important family dates:  
births and baptisms, marriages, and deaths.  
It’s a real treasure trove of family information,  
written down for posterity  
and for future generations.

The Webb family has one of those really enormous Bibles  
– have you ever seen one?

They’re about a foot across and eight inches high,  
with big thick covers...they weigh about 20lbs,  
and were really popular back in the late 1800s.  
I discovered some at St. Andrew’s  
while rattling around in here by myself  
these past weeks.

Anyway, we Webb’s have got one, too;  
been in the family for over a hundred years.  
It has a beautiful sheaf of paper at the front

for writing down all sorts of family details,  
even has special card stock pages  
for inserting photographs,  
an absolute gold mine of Webb family history...  
...or it would be,  
if anyone at any point  
in the last century  
had bothered to write anything down.

But even so, we've managed to fill out our family tree over the years,  
with dates and names and stories,  
from public records, letters and documents,  
memories and photographs.

Last year, though, I succumbed to the lure of those ancestry DNA tests.  
If you're not familiar, what you do is spit in a specially-provided tube  
– this was well before the pandemic, I promise –  
and send it away to a lab for scientific analysis,  
which then tells you where your ancestors were from.  
You get graphs and charts and percentages  
and stories and Neanderthals  
and you learn about all these  
exciting new places  
that you can connect yourself to, however distantly.

Making family trees and exploring genealogy are popular hobbies,  
whether you do it the old-fashioned way,  
or go all high-tech with DNA testing and scientific research.

And it's an ancient hobby, too;  
even if we forget to fill out our own family history in the front,  
there are many genealogies recorded in the Bible,  
dating back to the beginning and running right up to Jesus.

That desire to map out our ancestry comes from a need  
to fit ourselves into the pattern of the world,  
to connect with our own history  
and find our place within humanity.  
Knowing our back story  
helps us make sense of our lives right now,  
helps us understand why we are  
the people we are,  
and lets us imagine the people  
we might become.

Today, we're going to talk about the last little bit of Ruth's story.  
It ends almost like a fairy tale:  
she gets married, has a son with Boaz, a grandson for Naomi.

This is the answer to every bitter question in Naomi's heart.  
Remember that she thought her story was coming to an end:  
no more husbands or sons for her,  
no hope for security and peace in her old age,  
no future legacy of grandchildren  
and great-grandchildren.

But now through Ruth and Boaz,  
through God acting to provide abundantly for all three of them...  
...there is peace, security, family and hope for the future.  
Imagine telling that story to little Obed as he grew up:  
his grandmother's grief,  
his mother's loyalty and courage,  
his father's generosity and willingness  
to cross cultural borders to help  
foreign-born Ruth.  
An exciting bed-time story for any little boy.

We know Ruth and Naomi's back stories, if you will;  
we know what circumstances and history and experiences  
brought them to this wonderful ending.  
But what about Boaz?

Reading genealogies filled with names of people you don't know  
can be a little dull.  
But if you were listening closely,  
you may have recognised a few names in Jesus' family tree.  
Boaz was an Israelite, and so was his father, Salmon.  
But his mother was Rahab.

One of my favourite stories in the Bible is the fall of Jericho.  
Jericho was a great walled stronghold,  
a city inhabited by Israel's enemies, the Canaanites.  
Joshua, Israel's leader at that time,  
sent spies into the great city  
to assess their military might.  
Rahab, recognising the power of Israel's God,  
hid the spies in her place of business

on the condition that they promise  
 she and her whole family would be protected.  
 After Jericho fell,  
 Rahab and her family  
 became part of God's people.

Imagine the stories that little Boaz heard, growing up.  
 Stories about independent and courageous women,  
 stories about family and loyalty;  
 stories about foreigners seeking the protection and care  
 of Israel's God and being made welcome.  
 Those stories, being part of that family, shaped Boaz,  
 and must have also affected the way he saw Ruth.

Looking back, we can see where God has been working away  
 in both Ruth and Boaz's lives to bring them to this moment  
 where their stories coalesce and become one,  
 in this warm and hopeful happy ending.

If you want to build your faith in God,  
 one of the best things you can do is look back.  
 Imagine spreading a long piece of paper out in front of you,  
 and drawing out a timeline of your life.  
 Mark out all the big turning points  
 and the small moments that led up to them;  
 the big life-changing events,  
 and the ordinary days...  
 ...everything that got you  
 where you are today, that shaped who you are right now.

Looking back,  
 where do you see God's hand,  
 guiding your story?

Human beings have been telling stories for thousands of years;  
 myths and legends, histories and tall tales, fables and parables.  
 We tell stories about the world around us,  
 about one another and about ourselves.  
 And it's not a matter of accuracy or facts and dates  
 as much as it is about making sense  
 of our lives and our experiences.

Stories are like the signal in the noise;  
 they're how we make meaning of our lives and of the world,  
 and how we understand ourselves to be connected to one another,  
 part of a family, part of relationships and communities.  
 And just like we did with Ruth's story,  
 when we tell our own stories,  
 we can connect them with God at work  
 in us and through us and for us, too.

Those family trees we read about today  
 – Ruth's short one, and Jesus' longer one –  
 they show us what can happen  
 when we connect our stories to God's big story,  
 when the meaning of our story is infused  
 with God's plans and purposes for us.  
 Because of Ruth's loyalty and courage,  
 because of Boaz's generosity and hospitality,  
 because of Naomi's bruised but enduring faith...  
 ...the same abundant fullness, the same peace,  
 the same hope for the future  
 that they were blessed with  
 was poured out for all of Israel in King David  
 and all of humanity in Jesus.

The impact of those three small, personal stories woven together...  
 ...those stories are part of what shapes all of us who believe in Jesus.  
 Ruth and Boaz and Naomi form part of God's big story  
 of saving and restoring all of creation through Jesus.  
 And so do we.

This week, if you've got a bit of paper and some time on your hands,  
 tell your story to yourself.  
 Draw out that timeline and start marking it up.  
 Don't worry too much if you can't precisely recall  
 dates and locations and that sort of detail.  
 This is your spiritual journey,  
 not your Wikipedia page.  
 Remember what happened and why it was important;  
 remember when you had faith in hard times,  
 and when your faith was shaken as badly as Naomi's was;  
 remember when you were grateful for what God did,  
 and when you struggled to see him moving in your life at all;  
 remember when you were in need like Ruth,

and God put someone in your path to help you,  
 like Boaz.  
 Tell your story,  
 and be amazed at what God's faithfulness to you has looked like,  
 at what his loving, living hand has done in your life.

Those lists of names and dates at the front of our Bibles  
 – births, baptisms, marriages, deaths –  
 it's good information,  
 but it doesn't really tell us who those people were  
 and what their lives were like.  
 My DNA ancestry is fun and interesting to know,  
 but although facts are facts,  
 they don't mean much  
 until we use them  
 to tell a story.  
 Stories help us make sense of our lives right now,  
 help us understand why we are the people we are,  
 and to wonder about the people we might become.  
 Stories are how we figure out what things mean,  
 what's important, and what's true.

The truth of the story of Ruth is that God provides abundantly.  
 On their own, these four short chapters  
 show us how involved God is in shaping our stories,  
 even when we don't see him moving at the time.  
 But fit within the pattern of the much larger story of God's people,  
 set in amongst Abraham and David,  
 in the family tree of Jesus,  
 connected to us,  
 part of our family heritage through faith,  
 the meaning of Ruth's story is  
 still that God provides abundantly...  
 ...but now we see that God provides  
 abundantly for us all.  
 Thanks be to God.  
 Amen.