

Forty-Two Generations

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
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Scripture

*There were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David,
fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon,
and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah.*

Matthew 1:17

Sermon

I think I've already told you that I can be fussy. That's not the half of it. Because sometimes I can go off on a rant. I try not to. I bite my tongue. But there are times when I just can't hold it in. That's what happened at the leadership team meetings last week. I blew my theological top over this week's lesson.

NOW, DON'T GET ME WRONG. This week's lesson does have its moments. My favorite is when we find out that the Roman governor who ordered the execution of Jesus used to work for *Alitalia*, the Italian airline. Sure he did. That's why the lesson says he was a pilot: Pontius Pilot! Don't you love it when autocorrect fails?!

That's a good laugh. But mostly I find this week's lesson frustrating. And what really frustrates me is this. We get a picture of humanity in ruin, of all creation in ruin. Then we hear something about a promise, a promise that God would put things right. After that, there's this: "Thousands of years go by, and then, just like God promised, a bright light appears in the sky. This light stops over the tiny city of Bethlehem."

WAIT A MINUTE! WHAT?! "Thousands of years go by"? That's it?! Thousands of years go by and then, finally, God does something about his promise?! I think something is missing! And let me tell you, that is an understatement. Because what's missing is everything from Genesis 12 to Malachi 4.

What's missing is the story of Abraham and Israel. What's missing is the Law and the Prophets and the Writings. What's missing is the fourteen generations from Abraham to David. What's missing is the fourteen generations from David to the exile. What's missing is the fourteen generations from the exile to the Messiah. What's miss-

ing, in other words, is almost everything! That's what I was ranting about with the leadership teams.

"THOUSANDS OF YEARS GO BY"? I don't think so. No; those years did not just go by. God was busy for those thousands of years. God was busy on the great project of saving his troubled world. Here's another way to summarize things. This is from the upcoming, second edition of our study book.

The Bible pictures the problem before it reveals the solution. The problem is that God's "very good" creation (Genesis 1:31) is broken. The creation as a whole is broken (Romans 8:20-22). Human beings are especially broken. We are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28), but we fall far short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). The damage is staggering. The trouble is overwhelming. What is to be done?

Through his relationship with Abraham, God starts working to set things right. It is a long, slow process. The story is full of disappointments and betrayals—never from God's side! But God always keeps faith with Abraham's descendants.

God renews his promises to Abraham's son Isaac. Then he renews the promises to Abraham's grandson Jacob. Finally, God renews his promises to Jacob's entire family, Israel.

God has a long and difficult relationship with Israel. First, God reveals his Word to Israel through the Law. Then, God warns and encourages Israel through the Prophets. Finally, God disciplines Israel through the Exile.

Through it all, God remembers his promise that all peoples on earth will be blessed through Abraham (Genesis 12:3). And out of love for all the world, God sends his own Son to be part of the family of Abraham (John 3:16, Matthew 1:1).

Now, that's just a summary. But the point is clear enough. It's simply not the case that "thousands of years go by." No; for those thousands of years, God is keeping faith with his creation, keeping faith with Abraham and Israel. For those thousands of years, God never stops working his plan to put everything right. For those thousands of years, God never stops acting on his love for the world.

THOSE THOUSANDS OF YEARS MATTER. Those thousands of years are an essential part of the story. Those thousands of years are so important that, when Matthew tells the story of Jesus, he begins by tying Jesus to those thousands of years. He says, "This is the genealogy, the family history, of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

From there Matthew runs through generation after generation, name after name after name. Now, we didn't read all of those names tonight. Because nobody likes to read all of those names. But they do matter, those names.

Those names all have stories tied to them, good stories and bad stories. But there is one story that joins all those names together, from one generation to the next. It's the story of God keeping his promises: to Israel, to Abraham, to the world.

HAVE YOU EVER READ PSALM 136? It used to be one of my least favorite psalms to read. And do you know why? Because it repeats over and over and over again: "for his mercy endures forever." Twenty-six times: "for his mercy endures forever." Read Psalm 136 a few times, keep repeating that line, and you'll think the psalm endures forever!

"For his mercy endures forever." It's a dull, repetitive drone. And it won't stop. But that's just the point, isn't it? Read Psalm 136, and you can't get that phrase to stop. Exactly! Because God's mercy doesn't stop. God's mercy endures forever!

MATTHEW'S FAMILY HISTORY OF JESUS IS like Psalm 136. The names drone on and on. From Abraham to David. From David to the exile. From the exile to the Messiah. Name after name after name. And the point is that always and forever, God is faithful. Always and forever, God is keeping his promises. Always and forever, the story of the world is moving forward according to God's mercy.

We see that mercy most clearly in Jesus the Messiah. Here's how. First, Jesus himself is the end of the exile. Because Jesus is Immanuel. Jesus is "God with us." Jesus is God dwelling among his people to save them.

Second, Jesus is the royal descendant of David. Jesus is the son of David, who reigns forever. Jesus is on his holy throne, and he reigns in mercy.

Third, Jesus is the child of Abraham. Jesus, not Isaac, is the one who is sacrificed. And somehow his death on the cross jams up the gears of terror and misery and enslaving sin. Somehow his death on the cross breaks the back of the powers. Somehow his death on the cross unveils the unstoppable power of the life-giving love of God.

IN A MOMENT, WE'RE GOING TO MAKE OUR CIRCLE. In a moment, we're going to take the bread and the cup. In a moment, we're going to share the Body and Blood of Christ. Because we remember the story, the whole story. And because the story isn't over, not by a long shot.

From the time Jesus died on the cross to this day, from the time Jesus rose from death to this day, from then until now we could simply say, "Thousands of years go by." But that wouldn't tell the story, would it? No; because for those thousands of years, God has been faithful.

For those thousands of years, God has been gathering, protecting, and preserving for himself a people chosen for eternal life and united in true faith (Heidelberg Catechism, A 54). For those thousands of years, God has been gathering the church as the body of Christ. For those thousands of years, God has been sending his church into the world as ambassadors for the Kingdom. For those thousands of years, the church has been proclaiming the whole story, from Genesis to Malachi, from Matthew to Revelation.

For those thousands of years, God has been good all the time. And because God has been good for those thousands of years, we will stand together tonight to remember Jesus in faith. We will stand together tonight to remember that God so loved the world, tens of thousands of years ago, to this day, to infinity and beyond—God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. “For his mercy endures forever.”

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Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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