



For many, but sadly not all, reflecting on home brings thoughts of warmth and comfort radiating from a sense of familiarity. Similar feelings may be found in the repeatability of this time each year as we participate in traditions that celebrate the story of the first Christmas. Yet has that familiarity with the story led us to soften the reality of the people involved, to forget the difficulty of the journey a very pregnant Mary made to Bethlehem, and to overlook the trouble that came along with Jesus' birth? This Advent, we invite you to be home, to be present in the world and place in time into which Jesus entered. We may find the hardships of 2020 give us a perspective to relate to this story in a new way.

Preparation:

How do you define "home"? Is it a physical place? Is it a feeling? Similarly, how do you define "family"? Do these words elicit positive or negative feelings?

Read: Matthew 1:1-21

Notes/Definitions:

Abraham – Abraham's story in the Bible spans from Genesis 11 to Genesis 25. Initially going by Abram, it is quickly mentioned that his wife, Sarah—then Sarai—could not have children. In the following chapters, Abraham at age 75 follows God's call to leave his family to go to an unknown land. In Chapter 15, God enters into a covenant with Abraham saying that he will have a son, who is of his own flesh and blood, and that his offspring will be many. Losing patience with God's timing at age 86, Abraham fathers a child with his wife's slave, Hagar (Genesis 16). The covenant is reaffirmed in Chapter 17, when Abraham is 99. Finally, at 100 years old, Abraham and Sarah have a son, Isaac (Genesis 21). Isaac is the second name listed in the genealogy of Jesus.

David – Second king of the united kingdom of Israel and Judah. He was known as a man after God's own heart. Before he was king, he was a shepherd (1 Samuel 16:11). In 2 Samuel 7:11b-16, God enters into a covenant with King David declaring his offspring will rule forever. Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of that covenant.

Mary – A young woman from Nazareth, a small town with a poor reputation, and pledged to be married to Joseph. The angel Gabriel declares Mary is highly favored and will bare the Son of God. After the initial shock, Mary's response exhibits her deep spiritual maturity and understanding (Luke 1:26-56).

Joseph – Of the house of David, Joseph is a carpenter by trade and betrothed to Mary. He serves as Jesus' legal father. The last reference to Joseph is when Jesus preaches in the temple at age twelve (Luke 2:41-52).

Jesus – A common Jewish name "Yeshua," which is derived from the word meaning "to rescue/deliver"

Questions:

1. In verse 1, Matthew makes his intent clear to anchor Jesus' lineage to David and to Abraham. Review the notes above and the covenants God made with these two men.

This study has been developed for personal reflection and group discussion. To participate in the conversation, join a GraceCity small group. For more information on times and locations, email smallgroups@gracecitybaltimore.org.

2. Abraham and Sarah saw the seeming impracticality of God's promise, so Abraham fathered a child with Sarah's slave, Hagar (see Genesis 16). David followed his sinful lust for Bathsheba, a married woman, which led to a child and the killing of her husband, Uriah (see 2 Samuel 11). How does recognizing both the flaws and the triumphs of these two stalwarts of the faith shape our views of them and of God?

Despite their lauded position, both Abraham and David were not without significant sins and doubts. Thus, even the highly regarded need the saving grace of God.

3. In Jesus' genealogy, Matthew included four women in addition to Jesus' mother, Mary: Tamar (see Genesis 38), Rahab (see Joshua 2), Ruth (see Ruth 1-4), and the wife of Uriah [Bathsheba] (see 2 Samuel 11:1-12:25). In light of the patriarchal society of the time, highlighting women is unusual. What characteristics and actions led to these women being included in this list? What does their inclusion say about whom God uses in His story?

Among these women are non-Jews with complicated histories, who were abused and exploited by men. They stand out for their loyalty to God despite being pushed to the margins of society.

4. Jesus had no children, so in a sense, this bloodline ended with him. Yet how did Jesus' coming and the shedding of his blood on the cross present a new beginning of the family of God?

Through Jesus, salvation was opened up to the Gentiles, and the Jews and Gentiles became one family under God. See Ephesians 2:11-22 and Romans 11:11-24.

5. Setting aside God as Jesus' father, what might your expectations be of someone that came from this line of people? How might you have judged Jesus, looking at his family history instead of who he is? What does this tell you about God's faithfulness to His promises?

As already discussed, the character of those mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus is mixed. Much is written in the Bible of the older generations from Abraham to David and the line of kings that follow. However, the kings include those that did right and those that did not do right in the eyes of God, which led to judgement in the eventual capture by Babylon. Little is known of the later names.

6. Moving on to verses 18-21, out of devotion to the law, Joseph was compelled to divorce Mary. Out of devotion to God, Joseph remained committed to Mary and to being Jesus' earthly father. This commitment opened up Joseph to the same public disgrace and ridicule that was expected for Mary.

- When has your commitment to someone that is seen by others as less than led to ridicule?
- Where have you wrestled with faithfulness to the law and faithfulness to the relationships in your life? Do you skew more towards one or the other? What is an appropriate balance?
- Would you say that this is an example of Joseph getting into "good trouble"?

7. The angel of the Lord declares Jesus' purpose is to "save his people from their sins" (v. 21). In the overarching story of the Bible, this marks the beginning of the redemption of humankind's relationship with God. While Jesus remains the main actor, what role do we play in this and the restoration God's kingdom on Earth as it is in heaven?
8. Tying it all together, what does this passage say about who God includes in His family? What are the benefits of belonging to the family of God?

Through Jesus Christ, we all are offered an invitation to join and receive all of the benefits of belonging to the family of God. See Ephesians 1:4-5 (NIV) – "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will."

9. Those we consider family likely goes far beyond brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, spouses and children. What about your friends, your small group, your church makes them your family? How do they make you feel at home? How do you offer that same love and inclusion to those God has put in your path?

A common saying is that you can choose your friends but cannot choose your family. This applies to our church family, too! It has also been said that those in your small group are the friends God chose for you.

10. James describes pure religion to include an obligation "to look after orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27, NIV). What is the church's (and, by extension, our individual) responsibility to those that are alone or that are separated from their families, whether by death or other means?
11. GraceCity's mission is, "By the grace of Jesus Christ, reconciling people to God and to one another." How is that mission reflected in your discussions of this study?

Closing Prayer:

Advent in the midst of a pandemic is a new experience for all of us. Many of our traditions centered around large family (biological or otherwise) gatherings will not be possible. Pray for those that have experienced loss in the last year. Express gratitude for those close relationships in your life. Reach out to those that may feel isolated and alone. Be acutely aware of the needs of your neighbors, which may be greater than ever, and ask God to do immeasurably more than we can imagine.