

## **The Fifth Woman**

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

One of the things you learn quickly in parish ministry: even the strongest and best families can be incredibly painful and hard sometimes. Even the best, the healthiest families can make waterboarding seem pleasant in comparison. English writer Hugh Kingsmill put it best, “Friends are God’s apology for family.”

One of Oregon's most famous slash infamous people in the last century, Opal Whitelely, she knew this better than most.

Born to a logging family in Cottage Grove in 1897 Opal Whitelely was a true child prodigy. She was reading at 3, and was gifted with a love for the natural world and a photographic memory. When she was a teen she would give nature talks that were so popular adults showed up from miles around and actually paid the girl to hear her speak. But she was an odd little thing in what was basically a lumber camp at the time. She was dreamy and walked barefoot through the woods. One time they found her singing to the ground and asked her what she was doing- she replied she was singing to the earthworms. You know, loggers do a lot of things...but singing to earthworms really doesn't rank real high up there on the list. Her family, the community- they just didn't know what to do with her.

Things were looking up, though, when a couple of professors from Eugene heard her lecture and were amazed at her learning. One of them wrote that Opal knew more than his graduate students and that such a genius was a once in a lifetime find. And so even though she didn't fit in with her family or her community in Cottage Grove, Eugene might have been better.

But tragically Opal's mother died from cancer soon into her time at the University and her father, neither understanding nor valuing a college education, ordered her home to take care of the children. Opal just couldn't do it. She actually ran off to California. She tried to break into Hollywood which was just getting started, but that didn't work.

Then she moved to Boston hoping to get a book published. The book she wanted to get published, *The Fairyland Around Us*, didn't work out- but in 1920 she did manage

to get her diary, *The Story of Opal*, published. It was an instant hit. *The Story of Opal* sailed all the way up to #2 on the national best seller list. Opal was a star.

The only problem is that in Opal's diary, she remembers her past a little differently than everybody else. She creates a fantasy of not really being a Whiteley but being a French princess named Françoise Marie de Bourbon-Orléans who was kidnapped, and made to grow up in the squalor of a logging camp. She writes terrible things about Cottage Grove and Oregon in general. Her family and the people of Cottage Grove were understandably devastated and incensed.

Now some people today just see Opal as a liar, a con artist who just made up all this stuff to become famous. But I don't really think this is true. To me Opal is just an extreme case of someone who just felt so different, so out of place, so unappreciated- that she just had to invent another life, another family, just to make sense of herself.

Her family wasn't a bad family, and Cottage Grove wasn't an awful place. They just weren't able to understand her. And the truth is- sometimes even the best families, even the strongest families can be just incredibly painful and hard.

Matthew gets this. Matthew's Gospel gets this. Of all the Gospels Matthew is the only one to start out his version of Jesus' life with a family tree. Mark starts with Jesus meeting John the Baptist. Luke starts by talking to some guy named Theophilus. And John of course starts out with that amazing "In the beginning was the Word" business, but not Matthew. Matthew opens with a genealogy, a family tree.

And it's the strangest genealogy in scripture. See, every genealogy you will find in scripture- well, they all look the same way. It's a long list of fathers and sons. This

guy was the father of this guy, who was the father of this guy, and so on and so on. This is how it is in Numbers and Chronicles- this is how it is when Luke gives us Jesus' family tree. It's all men, all of them, EXCEPT, that is for Matthew.

Matthew does something no one else does- when he gives Jesus' family tree he includes four women in the first 7 verses. And when you realize how unusual this is, it sticks out like a sore thumb. For an ancient reader for instance, this would have been like a double shot of espresso.

And it's not just that there are women here- but the stories of these women...well let's just say this raises our eyebrows even more.

The first woman Matthew includes is a woman named Tamar. Tamar's story comes from Genesis 38. The long and the short of it is after two husbands dying on her Tamar winds up married to a third, a man named Judah. But three was not a charm. See, Judah preferred the company of temple prostitutes to Tamar. Now, I can't imagine what this must have been like for Tamar- two husbands die, and the third...well yuck. But, Tamar was what you might call a go getter. Wanting a child more than anything, she actually disguises herself as a temple prostitute. And sure enough, Judah offers her a goat for her time, and she agrees. I might have held out for two goats at least, but that's just me. But Judah wasn't carrying a goat on him, so Tamar says until he gets her the goat, she wanted his ring and his staff, as collateral.

Well, in a few months when it becomes obvious Tamar is pregnant, and Judah knows he's not the father, the hypocrite wants to put her to death. But at the last minute the crafty Tamar produces Judah's ring and staff and says the man who gave her these is

the father of her children. And Judah, filled with absolute shame, acknowledges she is in the right.

Well, it doesn't get any better. The next woman Matthew includes is Rahab. Now, this is where Access comes in so handy- we actually read Rahab's story back when we did the book of Joshua. Back when Israel had crossed through the wilderness and was right on the edge of the promised land they realized the place wasn't empty but was crawling with Canaanites. At the strong walled city of Jericho, they sent two spies to try and figure out what to do. The spies meet a real life prostitute named Rahab who winds up letting them hide out- who winds up risking her life when the police show up telling them that the strangers did visit but had left, when all along she was hiding them upstairs. And according to Matthew's sources, not only was Rahab a hero, but she wound up becoming an ancestor of David and ultimately Jesus.

Tamar just disguised herself as a prostitute, but Rahab was the real thing. I've actually heard people wonder why she would help the Israelites- I'm thinking she had known enough pain she would have done anything for things to change.

The third woman is a little more familiar to folks, after all she has a whole book named after her: it's Ruth. Now Ruth is another fascinating gal. Her story actually starts with Elimelech and Naomi who move from Israel next door into Moab with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Now Ruth marries one of their sons, but unfortunately, after just a few years, Elimelech AND both sons die. So without any family to take care of her Naomi releases her Moabite daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth to stay and take care of themselves and return their families. And Orpah is more than happy to take Naomi up on this, but not Ruth. Ruth gives that famous speech to Naomi- wherever you go I will go,

wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people. No matter what. And we love this- we read it at weddings. But strategically it was a really, REALLY bad move. When Ruth follows Naomi back to Israel- but they literally have nothing. So homeless, and hungry, Ruth is reduced to gleaning the edge of the fields leftover for beggars. Her only escape is from seducing one of the Israelites, a guy named Boaz. Naomi, the cagey older woman, tells Ruth to get Boaz drunk and take advantage of him- that he'd have to marry her then.

Now, I often make light of this story- it's just so surprising to me for a woman to act like this in the Bible. But there's nothing funny about this story- Ruth feels forced to take an enormous risk her with Boaz, not because she has gotten to know him and just can't contain her feelings, but because she's hungry. She's desperate. She just turns out lucky that he's a nice guy.

Then, saving the worst for last, Matthew offers up the fourth woman- a woman whose story is so painful, he can't even bring himself to lift up her name. When he talks about Israel's two greatest kings, David and Solomon, he links them together through a woman he describes as the "wife of Uriah". Now, you might better remember name as Bathsheba. And of course her story is probably the most tragic in the Old Testament- in the spring time of the year, the time when kings rode out to battle, David stays behind. And you might remember he winds up sleeping with another man's wife, Bathsheba. But this is just the tip of a very bad ice berg. She becomes pregnant, and in the attempt to cover up the problem- David winds up having her husband, Uriah, killed.

And then after this, you know the rest of the story, the kingdom splits, then the North falls, then the South suffers the Babylonian exile. In Matthew's eyes Christ's family definitely does not put the 'fun' in dysfunctional family.

And, if you get nothing else from Jesus' family tree, it's that even in the best family, the strongest family, a family of kings- there is a tremendous amount of pain and brokenness. And this can feel overwhelming. I remember in seminary in a Marriage and Family class one of our projects is we had to pair up and complete what's called a genogram on each other. A genogram is basically a family tree on steroids. After you complete the basic family tree with all your relatives then there's a battery of questions about patterns and strengths and weaknesses. And I knew my family wasn't perfect, but after filled it out with my friend Mary, and answering all the questions, and seeing all the brokenness, all of the crud in generation after generation, and seeing my tiny little square amidst of sea of problems- well I remember walking away from that experience feeling so small and just absolutely wiped out. I walked away feeling like at any minute the vortex of my family would probably suck me under for good.

And this is the same feeling I get as I wade through Matthew's genealogy. Everything starts off so good, but then, and especially following the four women's stories, you just start to feel like so much has gone on, so many wrong turns have been taken, that there's just no hope. Like at some point a family just gets broken, you know?

But, if Matthew leads us to this place- he sure doesn't leave us here. As honest, as brutal as Matthew is about the realities of family- ultimately this isn't actually his

word to us. Uh-uh. Ultimately, Matthew's word to us is a good one. The good news of Matthew's genealogy is these four women- as hard as their stories are, they aren't the end of the story. The way Matthew tells it: there is a fifth woman. The good news of Matthew is there is a fifth woman.

The fifth woman, the woman who shows up all the way at the end is Mary. Mary shows up completely out of nowhere- nothing prepares us for her, nothing points to her. In fact our expectation at this point is for just more bad things to come. But it's in the midst of all this that God does a new thing, a surprising thing and raises Mary up, whose impossible pregnancy changes everything.

Now, Mary doesn't erase the past- she doesn't magically efface all of the lousy, painful things that have happened to this point. But nor is she bound to repeat it all either. Mary's life is a burning light showing us that when we're feeling like nothing can change in our family- the past may well shape us, but it does not, I repeat, does not determine us.

You know, the end of Opal's life in some ways was pretty tragic. She wound up leaving America entirely and crossing over to Europe. At some point her fantasy life just took over, and people found her living on the streets in London. She was committed to Napsbury Mental Hospital where she lived out the rest of her days only responding to Franscoise, or her highness.

Marcia Allen, the town historian, said back then they all just thought she was weird. And the town disowned her as much as she did them. But today- today Allen says

everyone realizes that she needed more than they were able to give. That she needed understanding and, at the time, her family, and her community, they just weren't able to give her that. But here's the thing- if you drive down to Cottage Grove today, do you know what you'll see? On Main Street there's a giant mural of Opal and a park dedicated to her memory. And if you walk in the Cottage Grove library there's a life size bronze of Opal with bare feet and this dreamy look on her face that greets you as you enter. And so even though she turned her back on them- today the town is Matthew's fifth woman, doing something you couldn't have guessed even 10 years ago, refusing to turn their backs on her.

When I opened I said if I've learned anything in parish ministry it's that every family no matter how strong is also broken and sometimes pain-filled. And this is true. But what's also true, what's good news according to Matthew- is that in even the most fractured family God continues to hover over like those chaotic waters. And, over time, God raises people up and healing can take place- healing that you can't even guess at right now. And thanks be to God for that! **Amen.**