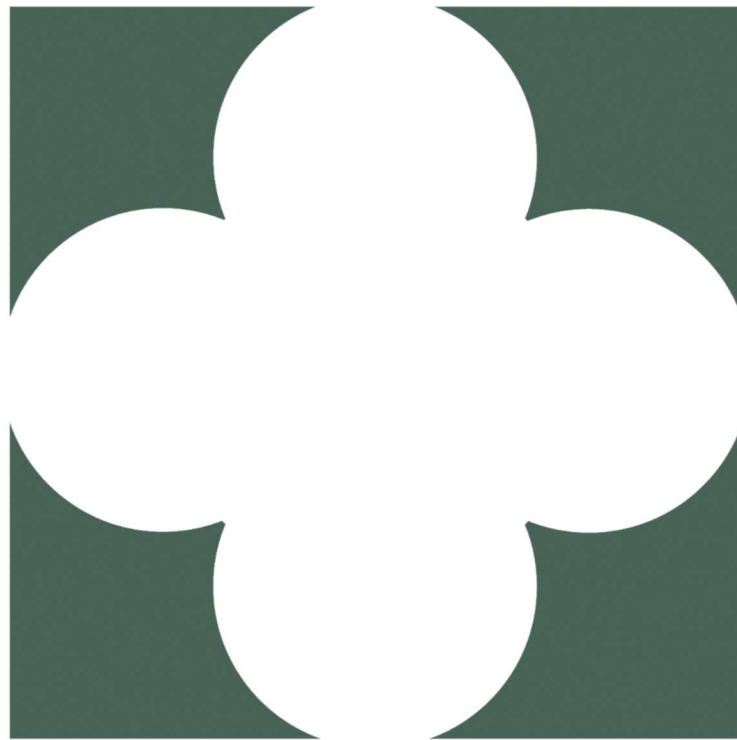


# Formed and Reformed

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**seattle first baptist**

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**Christmas Sunday**

Matthew 1:1-16

Who are you?

Who do you come from? Who formed you?

Who comes from you? Who have you formed, in your life thus far?

Friends, these might seem like odd questions to begin a Christmas Sunday sermon with, slowing us down after we've been singing "rejoice, rejoice!" and "joy to the world!" and "hark the herald angels sing" and more. Or perhaps we've had enough slowing down over the last week as many of us were stuck in place due to the snow and Seattle's steep hills. Yet, these questions provide an opportunity to pause, and our Scripture does, too, with a 16-verse genealogy of Jesus. I will do my best not to trip over names as I read our Scripture for today from the gospel according to Matthew chapter 1 verses 1-16.

*An account of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, descendant of Abraham, and son of Mary the daughter of Anna.*

*Sarah was the mother of Isaac,  
and Rebekah was the mother of Jacob,  
Leah was the mother of Judah  
Tamar was the mother of Perez  
The names of the mothers of Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon and  
Salmon have been lost.  
Rahab was the mother of Boaz,  
And Ruth was the mother of Obed.  
Obed's wife, whose name is unknown, bore Jesse.  
The wife of Jesse was the mother of David.  
Bathsheba was the mother of Solomon,  
Naamah, the Ammonite, was the mother of Rehoboam.  
Maacha was the mother of Abijam and the grandmother of Asa.  
Azubah was the mother of Jehoshaphat.*

*The name of Jehoram's mother is unknown.  
Athaliah was the mother of Ahaziah,  
Zibiah of Beersheba, the mother of Joash.  
Jocoliah of Jerusalem bore Uzziah,  
Jerusha bore Jotham, Ahaz's mother is unknown.  
Abi was the mother of Hezekiah,  
Hephzibah was the mother of Manasseh,  
Meshullemeth was the mother of Amon,  
Jedidah was the mother of Josiah.  
Zebidah was the mother of Jehoiachin,  
Hamutal was the mother of Zedekiah.  
Then the deportation to Babylon took place.  
After the deportation to Babylon  
The names of the mothers go unrecorded.  
These are their sons:  
Jechoniah, Shealtiel, Zerubbabel,  
Abiud, Elliakim, Azor and Zadok,  
Achim, Eliud, Eleazar,  
Matthan, Jacob and Joseph, the husband of Mary  
Of her was born Jesus who is called Christ.*

There you have it, friends. The genealogy of Jesus. Did you notice anything remarkable about this genealogy?

I hope you did. It is very different from genealogies we've heard before, and it's not just that the word "beget" is left out. This telling of the lineage differs from the translations we usually read because it doesn't single out the "remarkable" women who we've heard of before: Rahab, Tamar, Ruth and "the wife of Uriah," who we know is Bathsheba.

This genealogy is a matrilineage—it traces the heritage of Jesus through his mother, Mary. In this retelling of Scripture, the mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers are noticed, and named. This genealogy was written by Sister Ann Pat Ware, a feminist religious historian, linguist, translator and a nun with the Sisters of Loretto, a justice-oriented

order based in the rolling hills of central Kentucky. This matrilineage is shared in the Women's Lectionary by Dr. Wilda C. Gafney, which we have been using throughout the advent season to help us encounter these very old texts in fresh ways.

Reading this matrilineage of Jesus is powerful. Not only because it takes a presentation of a lineage that we are familiar with, told through patriarchal lines and re-centers the focus onto women. And it's not only powerful because it reveals gaps in the histories where we don't have women's names, where women are only known as "the wife of" and "the mother of" a certain man. There are no special circumstances that cause a woman to be in this list – stories of sex-workers-turned-spy or women asserting power dramatically or crossing borders or tragedy and coercion and scandal are not used to shock readers into thinking "wow, how amazing that Jesus had **WOMEN** in his family!" No, instead it lists all the women, some of whom may have done nothing more remarkable but live—and I count that as a true miracle, indeed.

This matrilineage is powerful because it gives us an opportunity to take the concept of "the heritage of Jesus" and all it has meant over the years, and re-form it to broaden our conception of what "God's family" means and who it includes.

In her recent article for the National Catholic Reporter, entitled "Jesus' birth to a single mom signals prophetic challenge to patriarchy," Sister Christine Schenk writes,

"In the *Women's Bible Commentary*, New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine observes that Jesus' unconventional birth "indicates the

restructuring of the human family: outside of patriarchal models it is not ruled by nor even defined by a male head of household."

With such a genealogy, it is no surprise that Jesus – taught by his Magnificat-mother – dedicated his life to raising up the lowly, scattering the proud-hearted and filling the hungry with good things.

In the messianic age, "family" would become newly defined for Christians as deriving from God's power to save through Jesus, rather than through human patriarchal power. The earliest Christian communities saw their kinship-in-Christ as a primary familial identity."

In recounting the ancestry of Jesus and naming some of the outstanding women involved, the gospel author offered a reformation to the patriarchal *pater familias* norms of the Roman Empire. And in this matrilineage, another reformation is offered to us, to further challenge us to reshape our understanding of who is included in the family of God and what responsibilities this belonging offers us.

This reminds me of a workshop I participated in several years ago, when all the participants were invited to introduce ourselves through our matrilineal line, by naming our mothers and grandmothers.

With this in mind, now, let me begin the sermon again.

I am Anita, the daughter of Amy. Amy is the daughter of Catherine, who is the daughter of Ida. I am also the granddaughter of Betty, who was the daughter of Ruth. And I am the great-granddaughter of Nancy, and Opal, and also Eleanor called Nanoo.

It must also be said that giving birth doesn't make someone a mother. Many people don't know the names of their mother, or grandmothers, for many different reasons. Or perhaps these relationships have been broken somewhere along the way, such that association with mothers or

grandmothers has been cut off. Given the complexities of mothers and mothering, I wonder: What if we started encountering each other through the stories of women who have given birth to who we are today? Yes, that means biologically, but also the women who have shaped us, who have formed us into ourselves?

And so I also count my lineage as including Marie, Mary, Tracy, Heidi, Mary, Frenchie, April, Deborah, Amy, Elizabeth, Kathy, Nanny, and more.

These women have formed me—have empowered me and loved me and helped me see myself. I wonder who these women are for you. Or who, these people are for you—those of any and all genders who have given you life, given you love, given you an opportunity to be your whole, beautiful, sacred self?

Take a moment to think about them. And if you are comfortable, speak their names into the space.

Now, let me begin again.

Regardless of your relationship to the people in your biological lineage, you yourself are an ancestor. Maybe that sounds confusing, since none of us can tell the future and maybe you don't have children and we're living in a time of climate change and ancestor can mean so many things...maybe a truer statement would be that each of us are made up of ancestors, physiologically.

I recently read this article entitled “Your Body is an Ancestor” by Sophie Strand, a writer from New York who writes at the intersection of storytelling, spirituality and ecology. She writes,

“Your body is an ancestor. Your body is an altar to your ancestors. Every one of your cells holds an ancient and anarchic love story. Around 2.7 billion years ago free-living prokaryotes melted into one another to form the mitochondria and organelles of the cells that build our bodies today. All you need to do to honor your ancestors is to roll up like a pill bug, into the innate shape of safety: the fetal position. The curl of your body, then, is an altar not just to the womb that grew you, but to the retroviruses that, 200 million years ago taught mammals how to develop the protein syncytin that creates the syncytrophoblast layer of the placenta. Breathe in, slowly, knowing that your breath loops you into the biome of your ecosystem. Every seven to ten years your cells will have turned over, rearticulated by your inhales and exhales, your appetites and proclivity for certain flavors. If you live in a valley, chances are the ancient glacial moraine, the fossils crushed underfoot, the spores from grandmotherly honey fungi, have all entered into and rebuilt the very molecular make up of your bones, your lungs, and even your eyes. Even your lungfuls of exhaust churn you into an ancestor altar for Mesozoic ferns pressurized into the fossil fuels. You are threaded through with fossils. Your microbiome is an ode to bacterial legacies you would not be able to trace with birth certificates and blood lineages. You are the ongoing-ness of the dead. The alembic where they are given breath again. Every decision, every idea, every poem you breathe and live is a resurrection of elements that date back to the birth of this universe itself.”

A Scripture we sometimes hear in the season of Christmas is John 1,

“1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being....”

Do you hear some resonance?

So friends, if on this Christmas Sunday, the most remarkable thing about you is that you woke up this morning—rejoice! You are a miracle. Your body contains multitudes—from the cells that made up the stars that Abraham gazed upon to the bacteria that have evolved your immune system to the oxygen you breathe in and the carbon dioxide you breathe out that gives life to green, growing things... your body itself is made of ancestors, of your ancestors and mine. Beloveds, thank God for you. Your existence is meaningful, and you are a gift to this world. You are a God-breathed miracle.

And the Good News of this day is that Christ is born! Jesus our sibling, who taught us to live and love in a new way; who shared his life with those living on the margins, reminding them of their value when human society had pushed them away; who re-formed what it means to be part of God's family as he declared all of us sisters, brothers, siblings with allegiances higher than our biology or our politics or our citizenship. Jesus, our advent liturgy tells us, "took on flesh and had human experiences and human feelings," whose body was made up of molecules that still circulate through the Earth now, and whose Spirit enlivens the cohesion of this community here in this place, and wherever you are.

Again, eco-feminist writer Sophie Strand:

"Today I realize that due to the miracle of metabolic recycling, it is even possible that my body, somehow, holds the cells of my great-great grandmother. Or your great-great grandmother. Or that I am built from carbon that once intimately orchestrated the flight of a hummingbird or a pterodactyl. Your body is an ecosystem of ancestors. An outcome born not of a single human thread, but a web of relations that ripples outwards into the intimate ocean of deep time."



So friends, beloved church, in this season of Christmas, I invite you to rejoice! Let us form and re-form our greetings to each other, knowing deep within our bones, within our very cells, that we are family. That we make up God's family. Let us take the world we have been given and re-form it in the shape of the kin-dom of God. Let us not be afraid to begin again, because there are many ways to live the Good News that Christ is with us in this new year! Let us go forward from this place to rejoice in the season of Christmas that has already been given to us, but is gifted to us again, brand new this day. And as we move toward the Feast of Epiphany in a few days, a time of enlightenment and revelation, let us invite wonder to be our guide as we discover new ways to be in relationship with ourselves, with each other, with our community and with all Creation. Let us go forward from this time ready to take our place in God's great big family, proclaiming "welcome" to all.

May it be so. Amen.