

What's In A Name?
By Jason Huff
Psalm 132, Acts 13:16-26,38, Luke 3:21-38 (abbreviated)

We continue working through the book of Luke this week with Luke 3:21-38. This passage tells us about the baptism of Jesus and his genealogy. Many weeks ago I promised that we were going to go through the whole book of Luke, and we've come to one of the most difficult parts to get through. To help us out, I'll only be reading parts of Jesus' genealogy, but if you're interested, I encourage you to take a look at the passage at home this week. Here's what Luke writes... "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Melki...the son of Amos, the son of Nahum...the son of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel...the son of Nathan, the son of David, the son of Jesse, the son of Obed, the son of Boaz...the son of Judah, the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham...the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lamech, the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch... the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God."

It's been said that a new pastor gets a few breaks from the congregation the first several months of ministry. When I decided to preach on the book of Luke, I knew once I got to the genealogy of Jesus, I'd probably have to use one of those freebies. Because from anyone I've ever talked to, there is nothing worse than biblical genealogies to stop somebody dead in their tracks. They're long, they're boring, they're full of names of people that nobody knows anything about...just trying to figure out how to pronounce the names can drive us crazy. Many people do their best to get through the Bible, and they hit chapter 10 of Genesis and a long record of genealogies, and all of a sudden, it's nap time. And don't let anybody fool you...lots of schooling and a Master's degree doesn't make them any more interesting. To the modern reader, we see these genealogies in the middle of a story and we wonder, "What were they thinking?" Often times, that's the end of the story. We get over the guilt and just skip ahead until the list of names finally ends and hope we can keep up with the plot.

But genealogies can be fun, and they can mean a lot to us when we understand them. How many of us created a basic family tree back in school? I know I did. And some people really get serious about it, traveling to different states and countries to track down birth certificates and death certificates and hoping to get some clue for the next bit of information that might lead a generation or two further back down the family line.

What makes it worth the effort? Sometimes, it's just the fun of saying you were related to somebody. Me, it turns out I'm 5th cousin to the famous actor Clark Gable. And when I played the bagpipes a long time ago – yes, the bagpipes – we did some research to find a proper Tartan. Turns out that I'm a bit German, Irish, and whatnot, probably not Scottish, but it was interesting to find out. And no, you can't ask my mother for blackmail pictures of me in a kilt.

But for Luke, the story of Jesus' baptism and his genealogy are interrelated, and tell us something about who He was and is and who we are. Luke is unique in this regard. Matthew's gospel starts right away with a genealogy of Jesus, and it makes the most sense for him to lay out Jesus' family tree right from the start. But Luke doesn't do that. In fact, Luke waits until he's given us the whole narrative of Jesus' birth and baptism before the family tree shows up. And he does it for a very specific reason, I believe...he does it to show who Jesus really is. The other gospels tell us a lot about Jesus' baptism...even Mark, who writes very concisely about most everything, tells us more about Jesus' baptism than Luke does. The others confirm that John was the one who baptized Jesus, but Luke doesn't do that. It's not that Luke doesn't know who baptized Jesus, but he's already written about John and, as we found out last week, his section on John the Baptist ends with him in prison at the hands of Herod. With Jesus' baptism, we're moving into a new section of Luke's gospel, where Luke focuses fully on Jesus and his importance.

Now the first question that enters many of our minds is this: why is Jesus baptized in the first place? He is the only person in the history of the world who does not actually need to repent and be forgiven. If baptism is only a sign of repentance and washing, then Jesus' baptism would be unnecessary. It might even make us start to question if Jesus needed to repent. But baptism is more than that, as our passage today shows.

Jesus is praying at his baptism – even as he's going through this washing in the Jordan, he is talking with the Father – and then something really amazing happens. The sky opens – which would have been understood as the heavens – maybe a parting of the clouds or a bright light, we aren't sure – and the Holy Spirit descends on him. Now the passage isn't really specific how this happens or what's going on. Often times we use the symbol of the dove for the Spirit; in fact, we have a banner in here that has the dove on it. But we aren't sure if the Spirit descends like a dove in some sort of flowing, graceful manner or actually looks like a dove somehow. And all the gospels describe it in much the same way; nobody is exactly sure what they are seeing, only that they are seeing something so magnificent that they can only describe what it is like at best. But what is clear is that the Holy Spirit has come to Jesus in a special way that is truly amazing.

But then there is a voice from heaven, and it establishes what this baptism is really about. The voice says, "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased." This is something miraculous, something unexplainable that the crowd with Jesus could not have explained. Nor did they completely understand it. Was this God? What does it mean for God to call Jesus His Son? Some scholars have read the passage to be that only Jesus really saw the Holy Spirit and heard the voice. Maybe that's true. But even then, we have an explanation as to what baptism is really about. Jesus was in very nature God, born into human flesh by the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet he lived his life humbly. There's no reason to believe that most people ever thought that he was anything other than a poor carpenter's son. And Jesus fulfilled that role until the proper time. His baptism was not a needed washing away of sins or repentance for Him. Baptism was his setting an example for us, being willing to go into the waters to show his complete and total devotion to God the Father. He is baptized so there is no question that he follows the way of God. Baptism was necessary for him to fulfill everything necessary of the promised messiah, to show righteousness in everything he does.

But then, God the Father speaks and declares, “You are my beloved son, with whom I am well-pleased.” We who have read Luke up to this point know Jesus’ divine origins. But here, it is proclaimed. This humble one who has come seeking baptism is not just anyone, but God’s Son, the one He loves, the one who has pleased Him in thought and word and deed. God the Father speaks and reveals to all who His Son is, at least, to all who will listen.

And ultimately, we learn from this experience that this is what baptism is all about. In the church, we talk about baptism from time to time, but we don’t always explain it well. We baptize infants, at least in the Presbyterian church, and we’re not quite sure why sometimes. We wonder what exactly it means. And baptism is surely about repentance and forgiveness; we turn from our sin and God cleanses us and forgives us and makes us whole. But none of those things were necessary for Jesus. But what the core of baptism is, is this: it states that we are the children of God. In the water of baptism, when we truly turn away from sin, God adopts us into his family and claims us as his own sons and daughters. We aren’t like Jesus in that respect; Jesus was really and truly the Son of God; He is the one and only. But when we come to the waters of baptism, God makes us a part of His own family. We are Jesus’ own brothers and sisters! Now we are children by God’s choice and not because of any inherent goodness on our part. But nevertheless, we can rejoice, because in baptism, we can call God “Abba, Father.” In infant baptism, we ask for God to make that claim on our children and to extend His promise to them. Confirmation eventually gives those of us who are baptized as infants the opportunity to make our own faith claim and to accept that promise that God makes to adopt us as His children. The promise is open to all who would come and be a faithful part of God’s family.

But Luke’s purpose is not only to show that Jesus is called God’s Son at His baptism, leading the way for us who will be called God’s children in our own baptism. Luke’s desire is to show us that Jesus has a past and a culture and a history leading back all the way to Adam...and further, then, to God. Luke starts by telling us that Jesus was roughly 30 years of age. This meant that Jesus was ready for public service...it was the same age of Joseph, of the coat of many colors, when he appeared before Pharaoh and interpreted his dreams...the same as King David when he began his reign...and it was the age that a man from the tribe of Levi could become a full priest in the temple.

Then we come to the genealogy itself. There are some fascinating characters listed. Zerubbabel helped lead the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem when the Israelites came home after seventy years of exile. David was the second king of Israel who united the nation and became known as “a man after God’s own heart.” Boaz is the man who eventually married Ruth, whose story is preserved in the book that bears her name. There’s Judah, one of Joseph’s brothers who convinced his other siblings to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt. Jacob’s the scheming trickster who nevertheless finds God as he travels, ever afraid of his brother Esau. And there’s Abraham, who entered into a covenant with God and believed God when God told him to leave his homeland and go into a new place that God would give to him and to his descendants. Noah makes the list, as does Methuselah, the oldest man on biblical record. There’s even Enoch, the man who the Bible says walked with God and then disappeared because God had taken him to be with himself. The line traces all the way through Adam, the first man that God created from the dust of the earth. It’s been said that Jesus’ lineage begins and ends at the same place, for the last person in the list is God Himself.

But perhaps what's just as striking as the incredible names in Jesus' genealogy are the names that mean nothing to us. Thirty-five of the names mentioned never show up in the Bible anywhere else. We know absolutely nothing about them. And yet they are the forefathers of Jesus! I didn't read them all this morning, but I did include a few of them. They are people whose names would be lost to time...except for the fact that Jesus' lineage is traced through them. And for those who worry about the fact that Jesus' lineage goes through Joseph, that should not be a problem. Not only do we have two genealogies, one likely from Mary's side, but we also know that Joseph raised Jesus as his own; Jesus was a part of his family line too.

There are a couple of things that we can see in our own lives from studying Jesus' genealogy. First off, not everybody in the genealogy is very impressive. Some of them did impressive things, sure, but others...well, they didn't have a great track record. King David, despite his desire to follow God, eventually fell to temptation, and his kingdom suffered for it. Judah, Jacob, even Abraham, they had problems, and those are just the ones we know about. When we look at Matthew's genealogy, wicked kings even start popping up! This is a very human list, full of people both ordinary and extraordinary, and Jesus was counted among them. Jesus did not shun his ancestry; both the good and the bad are here.

In our own lives, the same thing is true. Nobody has any say over who their parents or grandparents are. Nobody gets to choose their branch of the family tree. At the very best, almost all of us have somebody that we wish wasn't part of our heritage...and if we don't, we probably just haven't done enough research yet! For some of us who have lived in families with abuse or trauma, it's hard to get past what has been done to us in the name of kinship. It may be hard to see God as a loving Father because we never had an example of one, or had a really bad example instead. But the truth is two-fold. First, because God is a loving and caring God, he can redeem any family tree. Jesus' family tree was a mix of good and bad, yet He provided salvation for all who would come to him. We can even be the ones who turn around years of hurt and abuse and neglect; we can be the ones who plant the seeds so that our own families grow up differently. And also remember this: in baptism, you have become God's child. He has grafted you into His own tree, one full of forgiveness and hope, one that is eternal, and you will be a part of His family forever.

We also have to remember the forgotten ones...people whose lives were so ordinary that there was nothing to say about them. Except for this listing, we are clueless as to who they were, where exactly they lived, when exactly they lived. And yet they too are a part of Jesus' heritage. That goes to show us something extremely important. Not everyone who makes a difference ever gets recognized in a meaningful way. Think of many of the important names in Christianity over the centuries...Augustine, Athanasius, Tertullian, on up through the Reformation, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, even to the modern era...C.S. Lewis, Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, Chuck Colson...we give them all credit for their faithful service to God and to His church. But how did their parents influence them? Their grandparents? Who knows what prayers might have come along their family line for them...prayers from relatives whose names we don't even know! Think back over the people who have influenced your life over the years...teachers, maybe, friends, parents or grandparents...a lot of them will never make it into an encyclopedia or even Wikipedia. The memories of them might last a few generations, but then they will disappear, and there won't be a trace of that legacy.

But God knows all of that, and His legacy goes on and on. Our lives might seem small and unimportant in the grand scheme of things; we may never be important as the world sees importance and may fade into the pages of history. But we will never be unimportant to God, and neither will be the people who have prayed for us and have led us to the very place we are now. We can be thankful that God does not forget those who have followed Him and asked for Him to live in their hearts. We can live assured that there is an eternal legacy for us with God.

But this also reminds us, too: what are we doing to establish our part of that legacy? We have the joyful privilege of extending the legacy left to us, or perhaps passing on a Christian heritage to the next generation for the first time. Who are you praying for that they might come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord? What person is on your heart, to pray for them to start attending Church of the Covenant? There are countless people we meet every day who can be a part of God's legacy through us. Because we are all adopted into God's family, our spiritual family tree can extend far and wide to all those we lift before the Father...those in our own physical families, but also those who are friends, and even those thousands of miles away we don't even know. We may never know the full extent of what effect our prayers have until we reach God's eternal Kingdom, but the glimpses we have tell us that we can leave a spiritual legacy that will reach far past any physical family tree we will ever see.

Jesus was part of a family, part of a history, part *of* history. In His baptism and in His lineage, He was shown to be God's true Son, who pleases the Father in all things. And through his baptism and lineage, we can see that God wants to be our personal Father too, to adopt us into His family. If you've never made that commitment to God, if you've never said, "God, I want to be a part of your family," if you've never been baptized to stake that claim and received His awesome forgiveness, think about it, pray about it, and then do something about it. Because God wants to be the perfect father to you, just as He is the perfect Father of our Lord and Savior. And if you have, leave here rejoicing that you are saved and washed and cleansed and a part of God's family...and leave praying that God's spiritual family might grow through you and your witness to what God has done in your life. Let's pray.