

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI  
The Christmas Story is Our Story: Faith and Failure  
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Jeremiah 22:3-5; Matthew 1:6-11

It was just another master's thesis, or at least so thought the author and his professor. But before Teddy was able to have his thesis finally approved and was allowed to collect his diploma he would be sued, face a parliamentary inquest, be forced to apologize to the nation, admit the conclusion of the paper was incorrect, and then change his thesis. People on the street thought he should have known better. But Teddy Katz truly believed he was right, that during Israel's war for independence the Israeli forces had committed a massacre in the village of Tantura. There had long been rumors of such an event and Katz wanted to discover the truth. So he interviewed not only Palestinian survivors but one of the soldiers who participated in the actions in Tantura. They confirmed his suspicions. Unfortunately for Katz, this narrative of a massacre went against the official narrative of the government which was that the residents voluntarily fled Tantura and therefore Israel could occupy it as abandoned. It would be difficult to describe the furor that followed. Ultimately, Katz apologized and changed his conclusions, which was a shame because he was correct. He was proven correct by a recent documentary that interviewed most of the remaining Israeli soldiers who were at Tantura who admitted on camera that they had indeed killed around two-hundred men, women, and children and then buried their bodies under what is now a parking lot.

I do not tell this story this morning to shame Israel. In what Israel calls the 1948 War of Independence and the Palestinians call the Nakba, or Palestinian catastrophe, both sides engaged in the killing not only of combatants, but also non-combatants. I tell the story instead because it reminds us that every nation and people write their own histories in which they are the good guys; in which they are the heroes, and those they either defeated or lost to are the evil Empire. Sometimes these narratives are true. Sometimes they are not. But no nation ever truly wants to remember the moments when their actions demonstrated that they might not have been very good guys. And it is that concept that makes what we read this morning so amazing. This concept is what makes the Christmas Story far more than just a lovely tale about angels, a star, and a baby. I say this because the genealogy we read this morning is an indictment of the people of God. It is so because it contains a list of Judaic kings who represent the good, the bad, and the ugly of Israelite history. Let me explain.

This genealogy contains good kings. These are Uzziah, Hezekiah, and Josiah. These were the faithful kings. Each of these kings inherited a wayward people who had wandered far from the path that God had set for God's people. The nation had forgotten its purpose as we discussed last week of loving God, loving neighbor, and caring for the world. These kings worked hard to not only protect the nation but to realign the nation with this purpose, which was contained in its founding narrative. Then there were the bad kings, the names of which will surprise you. These are David, Solomon, and Rehoboam. I realize most of us have been taught to revere the first two of these kings. But what we need to do is to examine how they are referenced. David is mentioned as the father of Solomon by "the wife of Uriah." This seemingly obscure reference reminds us that David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband Uriah killed to cover up the affair. David and Bathsheba's subsequent son, Solomon, while praised as being wise, enslaved his people, married foreign women, and worshiped their gods. His son, Rehoboam, split the kingdom. Finally, we have the ugly kings, Ahaz and Manasseh. Each of these kings oppressed the people, built altars to foreign gods in the Jerusalem Temple, and attempted to stamp out the worship of

YHWH. Manasseh even reinstated child sacrifice. The question becomes, why does Matthew mention this lineage when it could have been avoided as it is in Luke, or not mentioned at all as in Mark and John? I believe that there are three important reasons.

Reason number one is that it demonstrates why a savior is needed. Let's assume for a moment that Jesus' lineage was composed of nothing but good guys who always did the right thing; who always led the nation into fulfilling its purpose of loving God, loving neighbor, and caring for creation. Why would they need a savior? It would appear that they were fully capable of being good on their own. They would have no need for a messiah to save them from their sins and redirect their lives back to purposeful living. The Law, the Torah, was all they needed to be faithful people. What this lineage reminds Matthew's readers though was that the history of God's people was one of faithfulness and failure. It was a mixed bag of the good, the bad, and the ugly. It was a reminder that if God's people were to accomplish their purpose, they needed help. They needed a messiah.

Reason number two is that this allows the Christmas story to become our story. Now I can only speak for myself, but my life has not always been one of complete faithfulness. There have been times when I have failed to live up to my purpose of loving God, loving neighbor, and caring for creation. I realize this probably does not apply to any of you gathered here this morning. However, I will ask if there is anyone else here this morning who feels the same way that, perhaps sometime this week, you might have said, done, or thought something which would make God just kind of shake God's head? Any of you? Ok, glad I am not alone. So, what this story does is remind us why we too need the one born in a stable; the one come to set us free; the one come to forgive; the one come to help us fulfill our purpose. This story is our story.

Reason number three is that this story reminds us of God's love. When my wife, Cindy, was helping to proof the bulletins this week, she looked at me and said, "You do realize that the candle we are lighting is the 'love' candle and your sermon title is 'Faith and Failure'?" My in-deft reply was, "Yep." My yep, was a recognition that above all, this is a story of God's love. I say that because God would have been perfectly justified in giving up on the people of Israel and even God's purpose for humanity, yet God refuses to do so. God's love and covenant faithfulness were so great that even in the times of the bad and ugly kings, God's love never failed. And the same can be said for our lives, that God's love never ends for us. Even when we mess up, even when we fail in living out our purpose, God's love does not fail. God's love in and through Jesus Christ continues to be made real in us, that we might begin again to love God, love others, and care for God's creation.

The challenge that I want to offer you for this day then, is to ask yourself: Am I allowing God to love me in both my faith and failures, such that I can love others in the same way?