

Try reading through the Bible.
Really;
 we should all try to do that.

It's quite a story.
 Love, death, revenge.

Also
 long, everlasting, dreary lists of laws.
And perhaps most stultifying of all,
 the genealogies.

In your grandma's King James Version:
 the begats.
 *And Adam lived a hundred and thirty years,
 and begat a son in his own likeness,
 and after his image;
 and called his name Seth...*
 *And Seth lived an hundred and five years
 and begat Enos
 ...and so on and so forth.*

32 verses worth! 32!

That's in Genesis chapter 5.
By the time you get there
 you've still got enough energy to push through
 to the story in chapter 6:
 giants
 and corruption
 and Noah's ark!

But Lord,
 it won't be long until you get to another genealogy
 and then about the time your faith is wearing thin,
 you get to Leviticus:
 literally - *The Book of the Levites*
 - *The Book of the Lawyers.*

I love lawyers.

My brother is a lawyer;
some of you are lawyers.

But law books are not known to be page turners.

When I saw our gospel reading today.

Matthew chapter 1, starting with verse 18,

I thought, *Oh good!*

They skipped the genealogy!

Matthew's gospel starts with a genealogy of Jesus.
Again, perhaps not the best way to hook your readers.

But...then I read a little something from the late Fred Craddock,

Georgia mountain preacher

and Bandy Distinguished Professor of Preaching at Emory University.

He said that Matthew starts things off

by taking a walk through Jesus' family graveyard.

It's not a genealogy.

it's a cemetery!

Suddenly it didn't feel so dry.

I remember walking through the cemetery

up in north east Alabama with my grandma.

I remember the stories she told me

as we walked from grave to grave.

I could remember some of the people,

but she was telling me new stories about them.

Most of the people we visited were dead before I was born.

Family

and friends who were like family.

 Moonshiners and church deacons,
 brothers and sisters she wished she knew better,
 and a great aunt who lost all her children young.

Now I go through there less often.

Now that I don't have my grandma to go with me.

And now when I go there,

 I go to visit with her too.

 Walking through a cemetery,
 through the family graveyard
 isn't like listening to a genealogy.

 It's the place where we bury the bones
 and where we can uncover the stories
 of where we were,
 of who we used to be,
 of where we came from.

Matthew starts off telling us about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

 Those three famous men.

 Broken, faithful men.

 Men that God chose,
 and who did their best to follow God when he called them.

 They did their best,
 but that wasn't always very good.

Then Judah, the son of Jacob.

Judah, for whom Judaism is named.

 He's in there right next to Tamar.

 Read that story some time.

 The story of Judah and Tamar.

 It's not a pretty story.

Jesus has ugly stories in his family.

Just like us.

Eventually we get to Ruth.

Ruth - foreigner, widow, outcast.

And the paragon of virtue and faith.

She doesn't belong in the Messiah's family tree!

She's not from around here.

But there she is.

The one we read about at weddings.

Your people shall be my people.

And all the rest...

And then Rahab.

Even if you've never read the Bible,

or never made it past Genesis,

you still likely know that Rahab was a prostitute.

She helped the Hebrew people

to conquer the territory they would come to inhabit.

A prostitute!

A hero **and** an ancestor of Jesus.

Eventually the list goes down to David.

David is right in the middle.

In the long list from Abraham to Jesus,

David is smack in the middle.

David was in the middle of everything.

He's a hero!

He is the greatest king Israel ever had.

And he is a scoundrel.

He did terrible things,

things that make your stomach turn:

betrayals of the worst kind.

Not just one,

but several.

And yet...he is called a man after God's own heart.
Not because God condones terrible behavior,
but because God has a heart big enough
for the worst of us.

Terrible and faithful.
That was David,
right in the middle of it all.

At the end we get down to Joseph.
Eleazar the father of Matthan,
Matthan the father of Jacob,
and Jacob the father of Joseph,
the husband of Mary,
and Mary was the mother of Jesus
who is called the Messiah.

And we are here at today's reading.
Matthew starts with Joseph -
starts with Abraham-,
but only as he relates to Joseph.

The angel visits Joseph first in Matthew.
Your wife to be is pregnant,
and I know you had nothing to do with it.

Joseph is left with a question.
What am I going to do?

What would **you** do?

We live in LaGrange.

A small town in the south.

Most of us have a friend or two
who might tell us to look in the Bible.

Want to know what to do?

Look in the Bible!

Joseph had plenty of friends like that too.

What am I going to do?

Look in the Bible!

You'll find your answer there.

Can't go wrong if you do that!

What should Joseph do?

I'll tell you what the Bible says

from Deuteronomy 22,

She is to be taken out

and stoned to death in front of the people.

That is what the Bible says.

I can't say it any better than Fred Craddock,

I get sick and tired

of people always thumping the Bible

as though you can just open it up

and turn to a passage that clears everything up.

You can quote the Bible before killing a person to justify the killing:

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," the Bible says.

Do you know what the Bible says?

*"If a man finds something displeasing in his wife,
let him give her a divorce and send her out."*

It's in the Book.

*I run into so many people who carry around a forty-three pound bible
and say, "Just do what the Book says."*

Is it just me;
just me and Fred Craddock?
Or have you had a forty-three pound Bible dropped on you too?

Joseph won't have any of it.
Oh, he loves his Bible.
He *was faithful to the law,*
and yet!
and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace,
instead he would divorce her quietly.

Because he's a good man.
He's hurt,
but he's a good man.
Quietly;
with dignity for them both,
they would go their separate ways.

It's here that the angel intervenes.
Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife.

The rest of it is all a bit unbelievable.
Something about the Holy Spirit.
Something about a son who will save his people from their sins.

It's all a bit unbelievable, but for whatever reason,
Joseph believes it.
He does.
And he gets Mary where she needs to be
- to a stable in Bethlehem.
Off to Egypt when things get dangerous.
Eventually to Nazareth when the dust settles.
And there he helps her raise the child.

We don't hear much from Joseph after these early stories.
Nothing at all once Jesus is grown.
He was older
and likely died before Jesus began his ministry.

But aren't you thankful for Joseph?
Aren't you glad that he said yes?
Aren't you so grateful
that Joseph was the one
who taught the boy his Bible stories?

Craddock is right on
when he says that Joseph read his Bible
through the lens of grace.

He didn't go hunting for justification or easy answers.
He read those stories,
even the ones about stoning and divorce
and he said, *There's something else happening here.*

Aren't you glad?
It's wonderful that Joseph was the one
who taught Jesus how to read the Bible.

That would have been a father's job.
To take the boy and teach him
about the law and the prophets.

And Joseph did it with grace!
He taught the boy about grace and mercy and love.

Craddock ends this way,
*You know, I am feeling good about Christmas.
 The baby is not born yet;
 Mary is not even in labor,
 but it is Christmas already because of Joseph.*

*Christmas for me has already started
 because I know that when Jesus is born,
 the man who will teach him,
 raise him,
 care for him,
 show him how to be a carpenter,
 take him to the synagogue,
 teach him his Bible,
 and teach him his lessons
 is a good man
 and he will do right.*

*When you have somebody like that,
 it is already Christmas,
 and Christmas will last
 as long as God can find in every community
 one person who says,
 "I will do what is right."*

*What is right
 is to read the scripture
 and to read the human condition
 in the light of the love and grace and kindness of God.*

*As long as there is one in every community,
 it will be Christmas.*

*The question, of course,
 is whether or not you
 will be that person.*