SERMON: Sunday before Nativity - Genealogy of Jesus Christ, December 23, 2018 Matthew 1:1-25

Why is the genealogy of our Savior important? Why does the Gospel of St. Matthew list all of the names in our Savior's genealogy, and why do we read it today on the Sunday before the Nativity of our Lord? The Hebrew people were anxiously awaiting the coming of the Messiah. It was the Jewish expectation that a new and special king, the Messiah, would appear and deliver them from subjugation to foreign powers, restore strength and unity to the davidic kingdom, as well as usher in a great epoch of health, prosperity and general well being. It was essential that the bloodline of David, which began with Abraham, continue unbroken until the Messiah, David's rightful heir, would appear. The unbroken royal bloodline gave hope to the Hebrews who were suffering for untold years under foreign subjugation and internal strife and division. Therefore, the royal genealogy was scrupulously recorded and passed down from generation to generation and was public knowledge. The genealogy can be found more than once in the Old Testament. However, when the Hebrews were conquered and taken into captivity by the Babylonians, all members of the royal household were executed in order to prevent the threat that a davidic king might arise and challenge the Babylonian authority. At that time there was a member of the royal household who was sequestered and hidden by the Hebrews. The Babylonians did not know about his existence. Through this secret and hidden relative of King David the royal bloodline continued. In order to protect the hidden royal family, the genealogy was no longer publicly recorded. This complete and unbroken genealogy, hitherto kept secret, is what is read today in the Gospel of St. Matthew. This genealogy establishes Jesus as the rightful heir to the davidic throne and identifies Him as the Messiah, the Son of God, who came into the world in order to save us from our sins.

It was not common practice among the Hebrews to mention the names of women in genealogies. In our Savior's genealogy which was read today, we hear the names of four women. The first is Tamar. The Hebrews practiced levirate marriage, which is a type of marriage in which the brother of a deceased man is obliged to marry his brother's widow. The term levirate is itself a derivative of the Latin word levir meaning "husband's brother". This practice was particularly important if the woman was childless, because it insured the possibility of her having children. Judah's wife dies, but he refuses to marry his brother's widow Tamar, who he wrongfully judges and condemns as cursed. Tamar was guiltless and there was no reason to disdain her; she was judged because of a wrongful act done against her without her consent. Tamar knows that she is wrongfully judged and uses trickery to get her legal right fulfilled. She disguises herself as a woman of ill repute in order to become pregnant by Judah. She keeps her identity hidden by wearing a veil. In exchange for her "services", she requests a goat, secured by Judah's staff, seal and cord. Later, when Tamar's pregnancy is revealed, she is accused of carnal sin and Judah orders that she be burned to death. Tamar sends the staff, seal and cord to Judah with a message declaring that the owner of these items was the man who had made her pregnant. Judah rescinds his order and is left with a guilty conscience and egg on his face. Tamar gives birth to twins, Perez and Zerah, and secures her place in the family tree of the royal lineage and the genealogy of the Messiah.

The second woman mentioned in the genealogy is Rahab. When Joshua is ready to attack Jericho and enter the promised land, two Hebrew spies are first sent into the city to investigate the military strength of Jericho. They are hidden in a house of ill repute, owned by a woman named Rahab. When Canaanite soldiers come to capture the Hebrew spies, Rahab protects them and keeps them hidden. In exchange for protecting the spies, her life, as well as the life of her family are spared when the Hebrews enter the city and slaughter the Canaanites. Rahab and her entire family are incorporated among the Jewish people, and she ultimately becomes part of the royal lineage and genealogy of our Savior Jesus Christ.

The third woman mentioned is Ruth, a non-Hebrew, a Moabitess, who is married to a Hebrew man named Mahlon. When Mahlon dies, Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi decides to return to her homeland in Bethlehem and tells Ruth to return to her own people and remarry. Ruth remains steadfast and loyal to the Hebrew people and the Hebrew God. She declares to Naomi that "your people will be my people, and your God will be my God." Naomi permits Ruth to remain

with her and Ruth ultimately marries a close relative of Naomi's family named Boaz, establishing her in the lineage and genealogy of our Lord Jesus Christ. The final woman mentioned is Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the Theotokos, the Virgin through whom the Son of God came into the world. The lives of these righteous women, Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth, one a woman wrongfully judged who imitates a woman of ill repute, one who actually is a woman of ill repute and plays a vital role in God's plan, and one who is a stranger and foreigner and accepts God and His people, and like a wild scion is grafted onto the tree of the people of God, illustrates for us that no one is beyond God's mercy, love, forgiveness and acceptance. God forgives and receives all who receive and accept Him. As one Russian Orthodox priest, Fr. Rostislav Sheniloff, points out in his homily on the Sunday before the Nativity, God came into the world to save all mankind, good and bad. In the Panikhida and Funeral service we pray that there is no one, man or woman, who is without sin. Only God is without sin. The Lord Himself said, "I came to save not the righteous, but the sinners." "I did not come to judge the world, but to save it." May our hearts be filled with joy and comfort, knowing that our Savior loves us, in spite of our faults and shortcomings. May we rejoice with the knowledge that our Lord is being born into the world for the sake of all of us, and no one is rejected and disdained. Let us rush forth, rejoicing, to that cave in Bethlehem, to greet our Lord, who is coming into the world to save all of us. Amen!