

**SUNDAY BEFORE THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST**  
**Matthew 1:1-25**

**By Archpriest Peter Olsen**  
**St. Basil's Russian Orthodox Church, Watervliet, NY 12189, December 24, 2023**

On the Sunday before the Nativity of Christ we always read the genealogy of our Savior Jesus Christ. Why do we do this, and why is this important? For forty generations the Israelites were waiting for the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah would be King of Israel. Therefore, it was revealed that he would come from the house of David. The lineage of David is an unbroken succession that begins with Abraham and ends with our Savior Jesus Christ. The genealogy was carefully recorded and preserved by the scribes, and it appears more than once in the Old Testament. Here are a few observations about the genealogy.

Women are not mentioned in the Old Testament genealogies, but in St. Matthew's version there is a break from this tradition. An example of one woman in the genealogy is Tamar, who was the ancestress of much of the tribe of Judah and, in particular, of the house of David. Tamar's story shows us that God chooses to work through people and their messiness in order to bring about His will for our redemption. Tamar was a righteous woman who was married to Judah's first born son Er. Er died very young and left his wife a widow and childless, so according to the Jewish practice called *levirate*, Er's brother was obliged to marry Tamar so that she would not remain childless. Thus, Er's brother Onan married Tamar, but he refused to provide her with children, and he too died young. Judah, Tamar's father-in-law, refused to allow his youngest son Shelah to marry Tamar, because he feared that he too would die young like his brothers if he married her. Judah told Tamar to remain a widow and childless. However, Judah's decision contradicted Jewish law. Tamar resorted to trickery in order to exercise her legal right to have children through her father-in-law's house. Tamar was told that her father-in-law was coming for the sheep shearing. She took off her widow's garments, wrapped herself, and—with her face covered by a veil—sat by the side of the road. Judah saw her and didn't recognize her. He approached her and, assuming that she was a cult prostitute, told her that he wanted to sleep with her. "What," she asked, "will you pay for sleeping with me?" "I will send a kid from my flock," promised Judah.

Tamar said, "You must leave a pledge until you have sent it." "What pledge shall I give you?" "Your seal and cord, and the staff which you carry," said Tamar (Genesis 38:16–18). She received the pledges and slept with him. Then she went home, took off her veil, and put back her widow's clothing. Judah, a man of his word, sent his friend Hirah with the young goat to receive his pledges back from the harlot. Hirah asked some men, "Where is the cult prostitute, the one at Enaim, by the road?" "There has been no prostitute here," they answered (Genesis 38:21). Unable to find her, Hirah returned to Judah and told him that he couldn't find the harlot. Judah said, "Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. I did send her this kid, but you did not find her (Genesis 38:23)." Three months later, Judah was told that Tamar was pregnant. Judah was furious and assumed that she had committed adultery. He ordered that she be brought to him and burned. Tamar, brought to the presence of Judah, showed him the pledges and said, "I am pregnant from the man who owns these things. Can you tell us to whom do they belong?" Judah examined them, recognized that they were his and said, "She is right, because I never gave her my son Shelah (Genesis 38:25–26)." He was never intimate with her again. Six months later, Tamar gave birth to twins, who were called Perez and Zerah. If not for Tamar's courageous daring and persistence, it is possible that the genealogy would have been broken. Among the other women mentioned in the genealogy are Rahab and Ruth. Take the time and read about their fascinating and edifying lives.

Another observation I would like to make is that St. Matthew makes a point of mentioning that the genealogy consists of three sets of fourteen generations. In some languages, each letter in the alphabet also has a numerical value. We see this in Old Church Slavonic, and we also see this in ancient Hebrew. If you were to add the numerical equivalent of each letter in

the Hebrew for the name *David*, they add up to fourteen. Thus, the evangelist points out that Jesus' lineage consists of three sets of fourteen, in order to emphasize that our Savior was part of the house of David.

Tonight is Christmas eve, and at 6:00 pm we will celebrate the Vigil, which is about 1 1/2 hours long. Tomorrow is Christmas Day and we will start the Hours and Divine Liturgy of St. Basil the Great at 9:10 am. Then, one week later, December 31-January 1 will be our Parish Feastday. At that time we will honor our heavenly intercessor St. Basil the Great. His Eminence Archbishop Michael will serve the hierarchical Divine Liturgy and will be with us for Great Vespers on the eve of the feast as well. Let us prepare for the feast of our Lord's Nativity and for St. Basil the Great by partaking of the spiritual joy and awesomeness offered to us by attending all of these Divine services. There is a sign-up sheet on the bulletin board for our Parish Feastday — only one week away. And finally, let us remember the life of the righteous Tamar and let us beseech the Lord, who will be born in the city of Bethlehem, that God in His love and mercy, will work through the messiness in *our* lives in order to bring about our redemption and salvation. Amen.

