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Honoring the Ancestors

Texts: Psalm 103: 8-18; Matthew 1: 1-17; James W. Loewen: from *Lies My Teacher Told Me*

My family is very proud of our heritage. My paternal great-grandfather was a legendary cowboy. George Lane was born in Indiana, but found his life's work in ranching. At 16 he rode in a cattle drive from Oklahoma to Montana. Soon he took cattle up to Alberta, Canada, and bought his own ranch, the Bar-U, which is now a Canadian National Historical Site. His Percheron work horses won a prize at the Chicago World's Fair. He was one of the original four financial backers of the Calgary Stampede, the greatest rodeo in the world. He was friends with the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VIII, who bought a ranch next to George's to celebrate their friendship. Another friend of his was the famed Western painter, Charles M. Russell, who painted George fighting off wolves in a famous canvas. George Lane is a member of the Hall of Great Westerners in the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. My family is proud of this famous ancestor.

In the ancient world, when you wanted to know something about someone, you asked about their family: where do they come from? What's their history? Who are their ancestors? So when Matthew wants to tell us about who Jesus is, he tells us about his family history. For most of us, reading a genealogy like this is easy: we just skip over it! Name, name, name, blah, blah, blah, got it. Next!

But what Matthew's doing here is worth taking a moment on. Matthew is putting Jesus into the story of God's saving activity in the world. God called Abraham. God made David king. God called the people back out of exile in Babylon. God made Jesus the Messiah, the promised king in David's royal line, the fulfillment of God's promise. Jesus is the goal of all of God's saving actions in history. All these other people were prologue to what God is now doing in Jesus. That's big stuff that Matthew is telling us.

But it's more than that. Check out some of the names in this genealogy. There are five women in there! Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah, and Mary. You might not remember exactly who these women are, so let's take a quick look. Tamar. Tamar was the Canaanite wife of Judah's eldest son, Er. Remember Judah? One of the twelve sons of Jacob, the brother of Joseph. When his son Er died young, Judah was a jerk and refused to allow Tamar the right to remarry. Tamar dressed up as a prostitute and slept with her father-in-law Judah, and fathered a son by him. Nice. Redounds to everyone's glory, right? Not a story we're expecting to find in the family history of the Messiah, but Matthew goes out of his way to mention it. So Jesus has a Gentile woman and a Jewish man of questionable character in his background. What about Rahab? Rahab was a prostitute in Jericho who secretly hid the two spies that Joshua had sent to check the city out. When Jericho fell, Rahab and her parents and siblings were spared. She went to live with the people of Israel and married into the history of the Messiah. So, another Gentile, and another prostitute. Looking good there, Jesus! Ruth, who gets her own book, was another Gentile woman, but not a prostitute. She was just a widow who was very faithful to her mother-in-law, and who ended up marrying one of her husband's relatives, as the law stipulated. But she turned out to be the great-grandmother of Israel's greatest king, King David. Another Gentile in Jesus' genealogy. The most ordinary woman in the list, but a woman of great loyalty and faithfulness. Next comes the wife of Uriah. Who was that, exactly? Well, we know her as Bathsheba, with whom King David had his notorious affair. She ended up being the mother of Solomon after David had her husband killed and took her as his wife. A sordid little soap opera. Finally, there's Mary. By this time we're ready for anything. But Mary's a contrast to the other women. Not a prostitute

or a widow, but a virgin. Still, the circumstances of Jesus' birth are wacky enough that Mary fits right in.

The genealogy tells us a lot about what God is doing in Jesus right away. We know that the Gentiles have been included in God's plan of salvation from early on. We know that God doesn't just use royalty in God's plan, but includes sketchy, impoverished, desperate people in the plan. Already this tells us a lot about what kind of God this is that we're talking about, and who God is going to include in God's plan of salvation: everyone! Jew and Gentile, saint and sinner, men and women, people of high estate and no estate, people who are famous and people who are infamous, the well-known and the unknown: they're all there. Just like us. Each of us can find ourselves somewhere in that list.

In fact, the list of Jesus' ancestors tells us a lot about the history of Israel. How it started small, with one man, Abraham, and moved to a nation of people. How they found themselves being led by Kings in palaces, and then being commanded as slaves in mud houses in exile in Babylon, until they returned again to their homeland. There's a lot of trauma in Israel's history, too—I mean, we didn't even mention the 400 years they were slaves in Egypt. And when there's trauma in a history, families remember it, and give their respects to those who had to go through it. Peoples who have come through trauma honor those who have come before, because their experiences have shaped who they are now in important ways.

Black families feel the same way about their own ancestors, and, since it's Black History Month, I want to situate our story today in the context of our Black friends and neighbors. Black History in America has been a story of survival, and sometimes triumph, through some of the worst experiences people could have. We think of slavery as a long ago thing, but it's not actually that far away. President John Tyler was a slave-owning President who served from 1841-1845. He was friends with Thomas Jefferson as a young man. On September 26th, 2020, President John Tyler's grandson – yes, grandson! – Lyon Gardiner Tyler Jr. died, leaving his younger brother Harrison as the only surviving grandson of the pre-Civil War slave-holding President. Slavery was not that long ago when we are still just two generations away from it today in some families.

Black History honors Black ancestors, and rightfully so. Black ancestors survived being stolen from their homeland. They survived being put on ships for the Middle Passage, the crossing of the Atlantic. Rev. Robert Walsh describes conditions on such a ship in 1829 (www.eyewitnesstohistory.com): "The height sometimes between decks was only eighteen inches so that the unfortunate beings could not turn around or even on their sides.... They were usually chained to the decks by the neck and legs. In such a place the sense of misery and suffocation is so great the Negroes... are driven to a frenzy." If their ancestors survived the Middle Passage crossing, their fate was to be sold as enslaved people. Husbands were separated from their wives, mothers from their children. They were freedom-loving people who did what they could to resist, and suffered beatings and whippings for the least sign of that resistance.

Black enslaved labor made white men rich. These same white men complained about Black laziness while supervising the back-breaking work of picking cotton from the saddles of their horses. The plantation slaves used to talk about 'light baby season,' which occurred about 5-6 months after the plantation owner's wife had given birth. You can guess why all the Black women's babies were suddenly light-skinned around that time. As the poet Caroline Randall Williams wrote in a New York Times Op Ed in June of 2020, "I have rape-colored skin. My light-brown-blackness is a living testament to the rules, the practices, the causes of the Old South. If there are those who want to remember the

legacy of the Confederacy, if they want monuments, well, then, my body is a monument. My skin is a monument.” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/opinion/confederate-monuments-racism.html>) This simply highlights the absurdity of complaints that people like Kamala Harris aren't really Black because they have white plantation owners in their ancestry. Lots of Blacks have white ancestors. But like Thomas Jefferson, when whites had children after raping their Black enslaved women, they went ahead and enslaved their own children, too. There were no special privileges for the white master's children if they were born in the slave quarters instead of in the big house.

When slavery finally ended, formerly enslaved Blacks were offered no 40 acres and no mules. They got nothing to help them start their lives in freedom, and often had to rent themselves out as sharecroppers to the same whites who had enslaved them. After the close election of 1876, President Rutherford B. Hayes took the presidency after agreeing to remove Federal troops from the South. Protections for Black civil rights disappeared overnight, and the era of Jim Crow fell upon Black people still trying to be free in the South. The ancestors persevered. The ancestors endured. The ancestors survived. Black people are right to have pride in their ancestors, and to remember them with awe at what they had to live through.

We all want to honor our ancestors, white and Black. We all have stories to tell about the great ones who preceded us. Many were fleeing persecution themselves. Many were able to work their way up from an unpromising beginning to brilliant endings. But sometimes we have to look at our ancestors with a critical eye, too. They weren't all heroes all the time. Like Judah and Rahab, some had scandalous morals. King David was a great king, Israel's greatest, but he has to be acknowledged as an adulterer and a murderer even if he is the ancestor of the Messiah. Even in my family, we have some hints that we were not all so great. I am not just George Lane's descendant, I am also a descendant of the first white baby born in Jamaica, through my paternal grandmother's side. As such, it is quite likely, though I do not know for sure, that my ancestors profited off the tortured labor of Black slaves. Some of my family's advantage likely comes from some Black family's disadvantage.

Like Jesus' own ancestors, our ancestors are a mixed bag. We can honor them for making us who we are, but we can also see them with clear eyes as flawed people who sometimes profited from the labor of others unfairly. As African Americans honor their ancestors for surviving the unimaginable horrors of slavery, some of us white Americans are still living off the benefits of that labor and the advantages of our skin color. That may be no fault of ours, and we may have had nothing to do with it. But justice demands that we consider making amends for what our ancestors did, and the advantages it gave to us. We should consider making African Americans whole for the suffering of their ancestors. That is one way that we, as Christians, can honor all our ancestors -- by doing great things for justice now, that redeem the bad things of the past. Reparations for slavery are something we should remain open-minded about.

Jesus' ancestors showed who he was, and that he had come from flawed people for flawed people, from Jews and Gentiles to redeem both Jews and Gentiles, from strange accidents of birth to a holy and virgin birth signifying a new beginning for all people. As we get ready for Lent to begin in 10 days, let us consider in our self-reflection who our ancestors were, and in honoring them and their accomplishments, also consider how we might make right what they did wrong. I know that I will remember and celebrate George Lane, and also show penitence for those other ancestors who might have been slaveholders. As a follower of Jesus, with his own mixed bag of ancestors, it's the least I can do. Amen