Welcome Home

December 23, 2007 (Advent 4a)

Isaiah 7:10-16 Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18 Romans 1:1-7 Matthew 1:18-25

My brother arrived last night from Indiana – actually, his flight was delayed, so he got in about 2 in the morning. (I debated replacing the communion wine this morning with high-octane coffee.)

Jason is the eldest of the three McLachlan kids. He's about six-foot tall, blond hair and blue eyes. And though we've got some of the same mannerisms, we don't look exactly alike in large part because we're actually half-siblings -- my sister and brother are the children of my mom's first marriage.

It's something I didn't really figure out until somewhere through primary school - I'd wondered for a while why I didn't have the Nordic look of my siblings – but it's still not something that comes up at family gatherings that often: it's simply one of the patches of the crazy-quilt pattern of our family.

Families are complex, complicated quilts. Start looking into any family and you'll probably find adoptions, remarriages, cousins split along the lines of an argument between great-grandparents, a branch of a family tree back in the Old Country or a branch that's traveled on to lands even more distant.

If Iza and I have children, when it comes time to do their family history project they might right about their father's grandfather who rode the rails down from Canada to South Dakota to escape the draft in World War I, or about their mother's grandfather who was a merchant from what's now Pakistan who married a Singaporean woman as the Japanese occupied their island. And if we adopt children instead, their story will be even richer, our stories and the stories of their birth parents.

Families are complex, complicated quilts. The author of the Matthew's gospel certainly knew that. What the Sunday lectionary leaves out today are the first 17 verses of Matthew – 14 and 14 and 14 generations from Abraham to David, from David to the exile in Babylon, from the exile in Babylon to Joseph to his son Jesus, *Yeshua*, God Saves.

And in those 42 generations of women and men – the family tree that's painted right up here in the Jesse Tree above the high altar Messiah – in those 42 generations of women and men is the craziest of crazy-quilt families. Kings and slaves, Jews and gentiles, priests and adulterers.

There are five women that Matthew mentions by name: Tamar deceived and had sex with her father-in-law when he failed to provide proper support for her after she was widowed; Rahab was a Caananite prostitute; Ruth was a foreign refugee; Bathsheba was seduced into adultery by David; and Mary was pregnant out of wedlock.

Families are complex, complicated quilts. It's a lesson that God's angel needed to remind Joseph of, during his dream:

I know your fiancée is pregnant, Joseph. I know what you think the law says, that she should be stoned to death. I know you think you're righteous and that you think the righteous, discrete thing to do is to quietly divorce her.

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But God wants a greater righteous from you – to love your fiancée, to love her son, to be a father to her child, to give him his name. Raise him to be a good man, to love God, and his family, and the torah, with all his heart: God wants a greater righteousness from you.

Now righteousness, that's a tough one. That's one we've been struggling with in the crazy-quilt family of our faith for hundreds of generations. If you talk with friends or family members who don't go to church, who don't believe in organized religion (I've been to diocesan conventions – I don't believe organized religion exists either!) It's usually self-righteousness that turns them off. As Billy Joel sings "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints"

Of course, if you read the stories in scripture, you'll notice that there are no stiff-backed plaster saints. These are women and men who struggle with sin and hypocrisy, who fall by pride and vanity and fear and anger, who murder each other, send their brother into slavery, their lover's husband to be killed, who struggle with addiction and anger and fear.

That, that is the family God was inviting Joseph into. That is the family **we** belong to as Christians - women and men, straight and gay, rich and poor, citizens and aliens. We're not a family bound together by being prim and proper. We're a family bound together for our passionate love of God.

It's a love like Joseph's love – inspired by dreams at night, and during the day haunted by doubts. It's a love that asks us to make hard decisions, asks us to take on the shame of the world in order to embrace the glory of God.

It's a love that doesn't give easy answers or set us on straightforward paths. We don't hear from Joseph again in the Gospels once Jesus is an adult. It's a love that values the most vulnerable of people – it's a family of slaves and outcasts, not just a family of princes and warriors.

This is our family. Ours is a family that embraces the whole world, not just Christians. As we heard Jesus say in last weeks' Gospel: *Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*

And by the miracle of the birth of the Word of God, by the miracle of Christ's crucifixion and his glorious resurrection, by the miracle of God's undying love by the miracle of our baptisms, we have been adopted into that family, that crazy-quilt family of God.

Welcome home.

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