

# **Rough Transcript of Bishop Spong's Sermon**

## **Renaissance Unity in 2008**

### **Matthew 1:1-17**

Congratulations, you have just endured what is by far one of the most boring chapters of the New Testament.

These are not verses that are usually read in church on a Sunday morning.

Indeed, these are not verses that are normally read at all, because most people simply skip over them to get to the story itself.

The boring nature of the verses disguises their risqué content.

Did you notice the risqué, indeed many would insist, the x-rated content of these verses?

I thought not.

So, let me provide a little background.

The Gospel of Matthew was written about the year 85.

It was not, I repeat not written by the Apostle Matthew.

It was given the name Matthew because it was the custom to give a book the name of an important character in order to indicate the importance of the contents.

We don't know who wrote the Gospel of Matthew, all we know is that the Gospel itself was written by an unknown author for a particularly Jewish oriented community of Christians.

The Gospel of Matthew, written in the middle years of the 9<sup>th</sup> decade provides us with the first written account of the story of Jesus' miraculous birth.

There is no evidence of a miraculous birth story until the writer of Matthew writes about 55 years after Jesus' earthly life has come to an end.

There is no birth story in Paul who wrote between 50 - 64

There is no birth story in Mark who wrote in the early 70's.

Luke, written later than Matthew has very different birth narrative.

and John written much later than that begins with a cosmic account of the WORD of God instead of a story about Jesus' birth.

But, the first time that we ever have any idea about the miraculous birth story of Jesus, it comes in the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> decade in the writings of Matthew.

And Matthew introduces the story of Jesus' miraculous birth with these 17 <sup>very</sup> boring verses about who begat whom.

The writer of the gospel of Matthew wants to make sure that he grounds the life the very DNA of Jesus in the history of the Jewish people.

And so he starts not with Adam, the history of the human race, but with Abraham the patriarch of the Jewish people.

And he traces the line that produced Jesus of Nazareth from Abraham, to Isaac to Jacob all the way down to king David, and he traces it from David to Solomon to Raoboam, and through all the kings of the southern kingdom until you get to the exile and the end of the Davidic monarchy and then he traces it from the exile all the way through Jewish history to the first century until he gets to a man named Joseph.

He traces the DNA of Jesus all the way to Joseph and then he says that Joseph really doesn't have anything to do with it.

It's a very strange chapter,

Most people don't assume that these first 17 verses introduce the virgin birth story, but Bishop Spong insist that they are crucially important to understanding the story.

When the writer of Matthew first introduces the virgin birth story he gives us great hints of scandal, the scandal of the crib, if you will.

He portrays Mary as expecting a child before her marriage to Joseph.

Joseph himself felt the pain of that scandal and so he decides that he will quote "put her away privately".

And behind that verse is a tradition among the Jewish people, that if a woman experienced rape in the city of Jerusalem or in an urban setting and she could not prove that she resisted the rape then she would be put to death by stoning.

But if a woman was raped in the countryside of Galilee and could not prove that she resisted those advances she would simply be returned to her father's home as damaged goods.

And the reason for the difference between rape in the rural and the urban area was that the woman that was being attacked in the urban area the theory was that someone would hear.

So, if she didn't scream for help and attract enough attention to stop the rape, then she must have been complicit in the rape and so guilty.

But if she was raped in the countryside and she screamed there would be no one around for miles and so the woman was given the benefit of the doubt.

In the story in Matthew, Joseph follows that prescription of the Torah and gives Mary the benefit of the doubt and so he is prepared to put her away quietly and return her to her father's home.

It's against that background of this potential scandal that Joseph has a dream and in that dream the secret of the miraculous nature of the birth of Jesus is revealed

But now lets go back to these 17 verses that trace name after name and who begat whom until after 2 or 3 verses everybody just skips to the next section.

What have we been missing when we skip these every so boring verses.

Well, the writer of Matthew leaves out a whole bunch of generations and we know that he leaves them out because their stories are told in the books Samuel of and the books Kings.

The writer of Matthew sort of forces a bunch of generations to get out of his bloodline.

He wanted to keep it very simple he wanted to keep 14 generations between Abraham and David and 14 generations between David and the exile and 14 generations between the exile and Joseph.

And the only way he could do that was to leave out a bunch of people.

If you read closely, the first thing you'll notice is that the genealogy is a bit skewed.

If you compare it to the genealogy in Luke chapter 3 you'll find that they don't agree at all.

Joseph even has two different fathers in the two different genealogies.

But the most unusual think about this series of boring verses is that four women are included.

Four women.

This is highly unusual in the first century, in an overwhelmingly patriarchal age, to include women in a genealogy of the ancestors of Jesus.

But the second thing that's very unusual about these four women is that by the standard of the day in which this story was told these four women were sexually tainted women, Bishop Spong refers to them as the "shady ladies".

Why do you suppose the writer of Matthew weaves into the genealogy of Jesus the stories of four shady ladies to prepare you for the scandal of Jesus' birth?

Well who are these ladies?

You can read their stories in the Bible, the writer of Matthew just points to them, but I'll tell you where you can go to read them.

The first of these ladies is a woman named Tamar.

Her story is told in the 38<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Genesis.

If you're not familiar with the story, you should read it when you get home today, because for the sake of politeness, I'm going to have to leave some of the details out and it really is a fascinating story.

Tamar is the daughter-in-law of Judah who is the son of Jacob.

She's married to Judah's oldest son.

But Judah's oldest son dies without leaving children.

And so under the law of that era; very patriarchal law, the next son of Judah has to marry his widow.

The second son is named Onan,

But Onan has the idea that maybe Tamar was responsible for the death of his brother so he's not really eager to marry her.

And so Onan goes through some interesting convolutions, which I will not mention in front of the children, so that he does not marry Tamar.

And he dies anyway.

And the next son is just a five-year-old kid.

Well you can hardly take the widow of your oldest son and marry her off to your five-year-old son but that's all Judah had left in his family.

And so Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "you must go home to your father and be a part of your father's household".

And so Tamar in a bit of a shameful exit goes back home to her Father and tries to pick up the pieces of her life.

And in the meantime Judah's wife dies so he becomes a widower.

And low and behold, in the course of events, Judah has to do some business engagement in the village where his daughter-in-law is now living with her father and Tamar learns that Judah is coming to that village and so she sets a trap for Judah.

Tamar dresses herself in the cloths of a prostitute and she sits at the gate of the city so that she will see him come in and make her services available.

And Judah comes and he notices this prostitute and he decides to avail himself of her services.

And so he goes and talks to her to find out what the price is.

And Judah wants to give her for her services a young kid out of his flocks.

But he doesn't happen to have that kid with him.

And so to serve as a kind of bond of his willingness to pay off this debt Judah gives Tamar his signet ring and the rope with which he girdles his cloths and one other piece of his clothing.

And Judah has relations with Tamar.

And then he goes on about his business.

Having no idea that it's his daughter-in-law.

Judah goes home and he takes one of his servants and he takes a kid and he has the servant deliver the kid back to the other village the next day.

But the servant of Judah cannot find the prostitute.

And so he says, "where was that prostitute that was at the gate?"

And the people say, "we don't have any prostitutes in our town and certainly nobody that sits at the gate every day.

And so Judah's servant searches for her but he's unsuccessful.

And so he takes the kid back to his master.

And some time passes; 3 or 4 months.

And Judah hears the rumor that his daughter-in-law is pregnant.

And he is as the bible puts it "wrathful"

He knows she's not married.

She's acted unfaithful.

She's an adulteress.

And so he moves as the head of his family to execute Tamar.

And he goes over and they bring Tamar out and they are about to burn her at the stake.

And just before they light the fire Tamar says, "oh by the way the person by whom I am expecting this child is the owner of this ring and this rope and this piece of clothing.

And Judah recognizes it as his own.

And publicly repents.

And takes Tamar into his own harem.

And she produces twins and one of them is named Perez and the writer of Matthew says that it is through this incestuous relationship of a father-in-law with his daughter-in-law that the line that was destined to produce Jesus of Nazareth actually flowed.

What do you suppose the writer of the Gospel of Matthew is trying to communicate?

But wait, his boring genealogy continues a couple more generations.

Until it comes to a man who he says is married to a woman named Rahab.

If you want to read Rahab's story you'll find it in the second chapter of the book of Joshua.

She was known as Rahab the prostitute.

She lived in the red-light district of Jericho.

When Joshua sent his spies across the Jordan River into Jericho before the conquest of that city, Rahab entertained Joshua's spies.

And they almost got caught, but Rahab helped them escape.

And so the spies promised that when Joshua's army moved into Jericho they would protect Rahab because of her service to these spies.

She was going to hang out a red cloth; a red ribbon in her window so that they would know that they were not to kill anyone in that home.

And she was going to bring all of her family into that home.

So the conquest of Jericho took place and Rahab and her family were spared.

And Rahab married a Jewish man and they produced a child

And what the writer of the Gospel tells us is that the line that produced Jesus came through the incestuous relationship of Judah and Tamar and through the life of a known prostitute; a woman named Rahab.

But wait, the genealogy moves on and the Gospel writer introduces his third shady lady.

Her name is Ruth.

You can read her story in the tiny little four chapters of the Book of Ruth.

A lot of people know the story of the Book of Ruth but they rarely read the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter.

Ruth is a very romantic story.

In a lot of weddings done through the ages and indeed in some that I have preformed people have sung what is called the song of Ruth as a love song in a wedding ceremony.

The song of Ruth says,

"Entreat me not to leave thee, whither thou goest I will go,  
where you lodge, I will lodge, thy people shall be my people, thy god shall be my god"

It's a beautiful song; the only trouble is that Ruth sings this song to her mother-in-law.

These days, not so many brides and grooms ask for Ruth's song to be sung at their wedding, when they realized that Ruth was singing this song to another woman, but quite a few brides and brides use it as the celebration of the love between two women.

For those of you who don't remember,

Ruth was a Moabite girl married to a Jewish man in the family of Naomi; a Jewish woman.

But they've moved into Moab.

And Naomi's husband dies.

And Naomi has two sons and both are married to Moabite girls and both sons die.

And so this family is now a family of a Jewish mother and 2 Moabite daughters-in-law.  
No male protectors.

And Naomi says to her two daughter-in-law, "there's no way I will ever raise up sons who will protect you so you must go back to your parents, that's your only hope.

And one of the 2 Moabit girls returns to her parents.

But Ruth clings to Naomi.

And that's when she says, entreat me not to leave you.

Wherever you go I will go, thy people shall be my people  
thy god shall be my god"

So together they move back into the land of Israel.

And there Ruth takes care of Naomi.

Now the laws of the Jews required that when people are harvesting the wheat that they don't harvest it all, that they leave some wheat in the field so that the poor can come by and have enough food, enough wheat to make bread to survive.

And so Ruth is portrayed as everyday out there gleaning to find enough grain to keep herself and Naomi alive; observing all of the laws of the Torah.

And Naomi who knows the ways of her world, realizes that the man who owns the fields where Ruth has been gleaning is a distant relative of her dead husband.

The man's name is Boaz.

And Boaz has the possibility of being able to exercise that male right to marry a widow of a kinsman.

And so Naomi and Ruth hatch a scheme of seduction and they set a trap for Boaz.

And the story says, in chapter 3, the chapter that nobody reads in church.

It says in chapter 3 that Ruth went down to the river and bathed herself until she was wondrously clean and she put on her best dress and she put on all the perfume that she had and she planned to go where Boaz was when they were going to have the celebration of the harvest festival.

And at this celebration the wine was to flow freely.

And Ruth was there as beautiful as she could make herself to be.

And Boaz drank generously of the wine supply.

Boaz drank so much that he passed out and Ruth sort of laid him out on the floor and put a blanket over him and got under the blanket with him.

In the old days, Hollywood movies would fade to black at this point so that you could use your imagination as to what happened next.

Imagine away....

So, next morning when Boaz awakened he had this beautiful woman lying under his blanket with him.

And so Boaz did the honorable thing, he married her.

And the story of Ruth is the story of an absolute act of seduction.

I wonder what the writer of the gospel is saying?

That the line of Jesus of Nazareth passes through an incestuous relationship between Judah and Tamar, the life of a prostitute named Rahab, and a seductress named Ruth who was prepared to do whatever it took to care for the woman she loved.

But wait, the writer moves on to the fourth shady lady.

But this lady is so shady that he won't even name her.

He simply says she's the wife of Uriah.

But if you knew your bible stories, the way gospel writer's audience knew their Scriptures, you know that the wife of Uriah is none other than Bathsheba.

You'll find her story in the second chapter of the Book of Samuel.

King David whose palace was the biggest house in all of Jerusalem when out on his rooftop and surveyed the whole land and he was able to look down on the rooftops of all the other houses in Jerusalem.

And below him on one rooftop was this exquisitely beautiful woman taking a bath and lo and behold King David was smitten with her.

And he watched her and he watched her...trust me this story about a peeping Tom pervert, really is in the bible.

If you put a picture of this on the cover of a bible, I swear it would become a bestseller once more.

King David watches this beautiful young woman bathing, and he is so smitten that he sends an emissary to her and invites her to come and have a tryst with the king.

Women in Jerusalem were not in a position to turn down the king.

And so she goes to David and together they have an adulterous relationship.

But it doesn't end there, it never does.

Bathsheba becomes pregnant, and through various machinations King David engineers the death of Bathsheba's husband Uriah.

And when Uriah is dead, David adds Bathsheba to his harem.

This is the story of an act of adultery and an act of murder.

Why do you suppose that the gospel writer is saying when he tells us that the line that produced Jesus of Nazareth flowed through an incestuous relationship between Judah and Tamar, the life of a prostitute named Rahab, and it flowed through an act of seduction on the part of a woman named Ruth and it flowed through an act of adultery that culminated in an act of murder in the life of the wife of Uriah the Hitite.

And then the Gospel writer tells the story of the unusual events that surrounded the birth of Jesus.

Maybe that's why nobody reads these first 17 verses of Matthew, maybe they don't want to try to contemplate the message that the gospel writer was trying to communicate.

What do you suppose he is trying to say?

I suspect that at the time the writer of Matthew wrote his story there was already a debate going on between believers and critics of the Jesus movement about the legitimacy of Jesus of Nazareth.

And I suspect that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew, captured that debate in the reaction of Joseph wanting to put away his betrothed and send Mary back to her father's home.

And then he told the story of the miraculous birth of Jesus to offer an alternative explanation to the scandal.

And then he buttressed his argument by saying that this is how God has always worked.

God doesn't work through moralistic acts.

God can take even an immoral act and work through it to bring good.

The line that produced Jesus can flow through incest and prostitution, and seduction and adultery, and murder and it still does not hinder the plan of God working through human history to bring life and light to the world.

So often people use the bible as a book of judgement they want to make it a severe kind of weapon with which they can organize and control the behavior of people.

But the writer of Matthew who understands the Christ function says, "NO the message of God in the Christ figure is a message of love.

It's a message of love that says, no matter what you have done, no matter who you have been, the love of God can transform any life and bring holiness out of any human distortion.

And in some sense the Jesus that is introduced later in the gospels is the one who lives out this pattern.

No matter what they did to Jesus, he loved them.  
No matter what they said to him, Jesus loved them.  
He was denied and Jesus loved those who denied him.  
He was betrayed and Jesus loved those who betrayed him.  
He was forsaken and he loved those who forsook him.  
He was tortured and he loved those who tortured him.  
He was killed and he loved those who killed him.

How else can you say with a life, there is nothing any of you can ever do, there is nothing any of you can ever be that will finally separate you from the love of God that we meet in Christ Jesus.

And even if you begin to hear rumors about the scandal that might have accompanied Jesus' birth you need to know that the God we know and the God we find present in the life of Jesus is the One who can work through any scandal, any pain, any distortion, any evil, any relationship to bring life, to bring love, to bring hope, to bring wholeness.

The story of Christmas is not about miracles.

The story of Christmas is about the love of God interacting with human life to create in human life wholeness, the ability to live fully, the capacity to love extravagantly, the courage to be everything that you are capable of being.

It is the power of God in Christ that enables you to live and to love and to be.

That's what the Christmas story is all about.

And it's told in a dramatically human fashion.

But you have to search in the most boring chapter of the bible to find the secret that unlocks the mystery that enables you to understand the profundity of the story of Jesus' birth.

The bible is a remarkable book.

People destroy and distort the Bible whenever they treat it as if it is a literal document about history.

It's not.

It is a magnificent portrait painted by a Jewish artist trying to describe the impact of a God-filled life named Jesus of Nazareth upon human history.

And when you and I read this story, as this story was intended, when it was written by the gospel writer we find that layer after layer, after layer must be gone through before you get to the core.

And that core is very simple.

**You are called to live, you are empowered to love, you are enabled to be all that you were created to be, and that's the message of the baby born in Bethlehem.**

Who came through a very checkered ancestry.

And who lives today within a very checkered history of the Christian church.

But the love of God is never distorted by the means through which it flows.

And it can never finally be distorted even by the acts of those of us who claim to be Christ's disciples.

Bethlehem means that the love of God has entered human life.

And Christmas will be real when you and I understand that we are now **that Bethlehem point** and that our job is to allow the God presence within us to flow through us so that the love of God might be known among all the people that God has created and that God still loves.

So think about the **shady ladies** and what it means to live inside the love of God as you celebrate this season.