

The picture on the front of the bulletin is my great-grandfather, John McCutchan. I don't know the story behind this picture. Neither does my last living relative who actually knew him.

There are some things I do know about him from family stories and family stuff I started going through after my dad died and we emptied their apartment.

I know he worked on the Taylor sheep ranch just outside of Grand Island. They lived in housing on the ranch and my grandmother and I think at least some of her sisters were born on the ranch.

Gramps later became the Hall County sheriff and served from 1918 to 1922. During that time a Black man was arrested for the murder of a white railroad worker. He was lodged in the Hall County jail when a lynch mob began forming.

The jailer and his wife got wind of the lynching plot and contacted the police chief. The evening of September 19, 1919, the jailer sneaked him out the back and my great-grandfather and the Grand Island police chief put him in a car and drove him to Aurora. There they put him on a train to Lincoln where he could be held safely until his trial. He was convicted and received a prison sentence, but he completed his sentence and moved to California, unlynched.

Those are the good stories. But he was also unfaithful to his wife. He borrowed \$18 from my grandma – his daughter – to run away with another woman.

Apparently, that relationship ended and his wife refused to take him back – it had not been the first time he was unfaithful. He wound up pretty destitute living in a shack behind a friend's home in Big Springs, Nebraska. Two of my great-aunts went to get him and bring him back to Grand Island. He lived with one of them for a while. But for financial reasons, both he and his estranged wife ended up living under the same roof with another of their daughters, but they remained estranged and she never acknowledged his presence. They are buried in separate plots at the Philips cemetery.

I could go on with lots of other stories, but this is supposed to be about Jesus, not me. So, what's the connection?

Genealogy is a popular pastime for many people. I've got family histories others in my family have traced back. And between those and what I can find on the internet without paying for anything, I can trace a few branches back hundreds of years.

But what I find most interesting is the stories. I don't care too much about just the dates and places of the family tree, although the places can be interesting to learn about.

I like it when I can find stories. Some I've found in family papers. Others I've found online. Together, they tell the story of people with whom I share a bit of DNA, and a huge story. All of us are born, not just into a line of people, but we are born into stories.

Jesus was in that sense no different. He was born into a family with a big story that has lots of interesting characters and stories. It just happens that his family stories have been saved for thousands of years.

So, what does Jesus' genealogy tell us? First, it affirms Jesus' humanity. He was born into a family like all humans. And the fact that its Joseph's family line listed here does a couple of things. First, it reminds us of the patriarchal structure of Jesus' world. We don't get Mary's genealogy. The reality is, the further back you go the more likely her ancestors were some of the same people. But it's OK to feel some modern-day angst about that patriarchal structure.

And it is important that Joseph's fatherhood of Jesus be acknowledged. Adopted people may have a DNA line that can be traced through 23 and Me and the like. But their family stories are the stories of the family that adopted them. And that was true of Jesus as well.

The next thing we can note is that Jesus comes from a line of royalty. King David, King Solomon, and the descendants after Solomon were kings. That's what you would expect of a newborn king...a long royal pedigree.

But there are some outliers. First of all, there are four women in the genealogy. You wouldn't normally expect that in a patriarchal society. And all four of them have a story that is at least somewhat scandalous.

The first is Tamar. Tamar had married several of Judah's sons, but they kept dying. Judah failed to keep his promise to marry her to his youngest son when he came of age. So, she dressed like a prostitute and tricked Judah into sleeping with her so he would marry her. And he did, and Tamar became an ancestor of Jesus.

The next is Rahab who actually was a prostitute.

Then there's Ruth – not so much a scandal, but Ruth wasn't Jewish, and that was kind of taboo. Then there's David whose crime against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah becomes a part of Jesus' story.

The inclusion of these women is partly why I actually love the genealogy of Jesus, even though it's hard to read. With these stories, you begin to see that Jesus just might be a different kind of royalty – a king whose family story is not afraid to include vulnerability and the resilience of survivors of exploitation.

Next, there's the truth that several of Jesus' royal ancestors – the kings – were terrible kings...corrupt, unfaithful to God, greedy for wealth and power.

That gets us to the most important thing the genealogy of Jesus does. That whole story...that whole family line... gets taken up into that newborn baby, born in a stable in a small town in Judah. And the story and its characters get redeemed in the birth of that perfect human. It all becomes part of the new creation.

That's the pattern of salvation – in Jesus, everything that has come before gets taken up in his flesh. All of human history is taken up in Jesus. The good carries on and the bad is redeemed.

And the crazy thing is that because Jesus defeated death, that redemption didn't just stop when Jesus was crucified.

It still happens for us. Everything we are gets taken up into Jesus...specifically on the cross. Our family stories and our personal stories get taken up. The good carries on and the bad is redeemed. Just as Jesus' incarnation is a redemption of his family and his people, his incarnation, death, and resurrection represent redemption for all creation. A new creation is born.

We become a part of the new creation...here and now and into eternity.

Our story becomes a part of this ancient story of God...but yet in Christ it becomes a new story, over and over.

We all have family stories like that of my Gramps McCutchan – kind of a mixed bag.

We have that same mixed bag in our own personal stories.

But it all gets taken up by Jesus and becomes a new story.

It's a great theme for New Year's Day. A new year begins today. I think that's part of why there's so much appeal to New Year's resolutions...that idea of a new start is wired into us. We don't really have any way to know where our story will go in the coming year. But there will be ways in which it will be the same story...it will be a mixed bag. We'll have ups and we'll have downs. We'll get some things right and we'll botch some things.

This coming year in our story will be also like all the others in that we will again be a part of God's story. Our story will get taken up into the God made human. The good will carry through. The bad? Well, we'll face it. We'll face the things we mess up and do our best to make them right. But then we'll trust that in Christ, all things are redeemed and all things are made new.