The Women in the Story, Advent part three. Luke 2:4-14

1. When I was a boy, I joined with my mates in a “Read the New Testament in a Year” program (the whole Bible was for an older crowd). I was quite looking forward to it…and then I read Matthew chapter 1.

2. Is this any way to start a movement? And, yes, I am aware that Luke also did a genealogy and that his differs from Matthew’s but there are reasons for that and I don’t want to get sidetracked from this one. While this looks quite boring, it is actually rather alarming, shocking, and…informative.

3. I submit that if you know what God is doing with this list, you will understand a lot more about Who God is and why our faith should make us leap for joy for this is truly Good News.

4. There are four women listed in Matthew’s list here…but, no, there are five; you have to add Mary in. All of these women had something in common: a hint, or more than a hint, of scandal. Why would the Holy Spirit stick these names in there when Jesus had to have had a lot of good grandmothers who went to temple and made cookies???

5. Parents, please note: I am toning down my comments quite a lot because of the little ears among us. You see, this is truly shocking and not boring at all.

6. First of all, there are women listed. That was just not done in Matthew’s day. For example, look at the genealogy in Luke and there isn’t a single woman listed. All rights and all property went through the male line. Women had no property of their own (in almost all cases). But God wanted these women listed – not just women but THESE women.

7. I used to read the Old Testament and completely miss what God was doing back there. Last week, we looked at The Angel of the Lord and saw it was God in action on earth; Jesus in the form of an angel. And did you notice what he did? He went to Hagar, to Samson’s mother. Yes, He appeared to men as well, but most of the men He

approached were weak or at their weakest moment: Balaam, Isaac, Jocob, Elijah.

8. And now, in the Gospels, he tells the Christmas story through the eyes of women: Mary, Elizabeth and Anna. Women are the stars of this story and that, itself, was a shock to the system of first century society. This was a world in which Jewish men routinely said a prayer with this line in it: “I thank God that I was not born a slave, a Gentile, or a woman.” Yikes.

9. So, let’s start with the first name: Tamar. That was a name and a story most Jewish people would rather forget and I don’t blame them a bit. Let’s unroll her story – carefully! Judah married a Canaanite woman and they had three sons: Er, Onan and Shelah. Jacob got a wife for his oldest son, Er, but Er was an evil man, so evil that the scripture says God killed him.

10. Here is where we have to time travel a LOT and we need to be careful. The whole story is told in Genesis 38. The law was very plain here: Tamar was now a widow but her dead husband had brothers. They were obligated to marry her and to raise up sons that would be considered Er’s sons and heirs.

11. Judah instructed Onan to have relations with Tamar so that she could become pregnant and give birth to sons. Marriage was a concept and an action in those days, not a ceremony. Onan used Tamar but refused to get her pregnant so God killed him, too.

12. Now, there was just a very young son left, Shelah. He was too young to be married but the law, again, was plain: she was promised to him and he would have to do his duty when he grew old enough to marry. However, Judah didn’t want Tamar around. He decided that he had lost two sons and maybe Tamar was bad luck. He sent her to her father’s house for her to live there as a wisdom until Shelah was old enough.

13. Shelah did, indeed, grow up but Judah reneged on his promise and did not send for Tamar (she knew). She was unable to marry anyone else as she was promised to Shelah. If her father died, she would be homeless, so she resorted to a scheme that only worked

because Judah was evil. She took off her widow's clothes and veiled herself as a sex worker. She sat at the entrance of the city where she knew Judah picked up women to use them…and he did.

14. She became pregnant. When word got back to Judah, he insisted that she be brought out and killed because she was an adulteress. She came out and showed him the things he had used to buy her as a prostitute, proving she was pregnant by him. She gave birth to twins….and the Holy Spirit wanted her name in this list.

15. The very woman others tossed away and mistreated, God sought out and saved…and then honored her in Matthew 1.

16. The next woman is Rahab (Joshua 2). She ran a house of prostitution and hid the spies. When she lied for them, God saved her family…once again turning our ideas about God and judgment upside down. The writer of Hebrews and James both say that she was saved because she acted in faith. When we next see her name, she is outside the camp. The next time, she is married to a Jewish man. The next? One of Jesus' grandmothers.

17. Then comes Bathsheba or, as Matthew calls her, the wife of Uriah. David wasn't where he was supposed to be when he spied on her bathing. He then sent for her and, in ancient times, when the king sent for you, you went to him and did what he wanted you to do – period. This was no seduction; this was sexual abuse by David. He exploited her and then, when she became pregnant, he tried to scheme a way to get away with it. When that fell apart, he resorted to murder.

18. We don't get to see into the mind or life of Bathsheba but she was likely a woman who suffered the rest of her life. She would have been stigmatized by the other women in David's household and, most likely, Jerusalem. She quickly becomes a non person in the OT but the Holy Spirit puts her into Jesus' line. See a pattern?

19. And then…Ruth. If you think of Ruth as a love story, you are correct, but this is no Hallmark movie. Ruth was a Moabite and they were despised by Jews. In Deut. 23:3, Moses declared that no Moabite, to the tenth generation, could enter the assembly of the

Jews. They were sworn enemies forever. Forced by famine to relocate, Naomi returns to Israel, broken and widowed and done. Ruth goes with her even though it means a life of pain and reje ction for her.

20. Boaz sees her and provides for her. He is a good man. Ruth then “uncovers his feet” which is a sexually charged term. Boaz is so touched and shocked that she would choose him that he concocts a plan to be her kinsman redeemer. It works and he marries her. Her grandson would become David, king of Israel which made her Jesus’s grandmother.

21. When Jesus came, he came in the body of a young girl, perhaps 14 years old, who was not married. Her name, of course, was Mary. The scandal was forever. Her own sons did not believe her story so you know the locals didn’t buy it, either. She would have had to work alone, gather wood for the fire and water for her home…alone.

22. And who did Jesus take time to see and protect? A Samaritan woman who’d been married five times and was now living with another man who misused her. A Syro-Phoenician woman with no standing in Israel. A woman who suffered uterine bleeding and ostracism. A fallen woman who broke from the wall and cried over Jesus’ feet, touching him as she wept. And more. He sought them out just as God sought them out and placed them in Jesus’s line.

23. This is Advent. This is why these words matter: Matthew 1:18-21; Luke 2:4-14.

You see, when God says “peace on earth” and “do not be afraid,” He means it. Look at who He sought out. Look at who He loved and protected. And He has never changed. He still seeks us out, not to condemn us, but to love us. Blessed be the Name of the Lord.