

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 21, 2014

**The Holy Cousins**  
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys  
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2 Samuel 7:1-11,16 Psalm 89: 1-4,19-26 Luke 1:26-38

I grew up in a large extended family. While I only have one sibling, my brother Jim, each of my parents had about six brothers and sisters, most of whom had large families. I have a lot of cousins scattered all over the country. My great aunt Mary had 21 children. Just think of the number of additional cousins a family of 21 siblings most likely produced. The numbers are mind boggling.

When I was in college in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, even though my immediate family lived in Florida, I was surrounded by family members living in and around Pittsburgh. I don't remember the exact number but I know that I had between 35 and 40 aunts, uncles and first cousins in the Pittsburgh area alone.

It is amazing how many people you can trace in a family, and more often than not, we call them cousins.

My wife and I have four children. All of them are married and at this point in time we have five grandchildren – five cousins to each other. In another generation or two, their first, second and third cousins will probably greatly increase in number. Families grow exponentially. One of our sons has been tracing our family tree. So far, he has not found many surprises but he did locate some family members that we didn't know about. Of course he has no way of tracing what the family tree will look like in the future.

If you have ever tried to trace your family tree, you probably are amazed at how many people you are related to in one way or another, either by blood or by marriage. While you are doing this, you probably hope to find someone in your vast family tree who was world famous or you hope that one of your descendents will accomplish great things in the future.

Now what does this have to do with our scripture passages for today? I ordinarily choose one or two passages of scripture as the text for my sermons but today I chose three passages, an Old Testament reading, a Psalm, and a Gospel reading. All three of

these scripture passages, in one way or another, relate to a single family and its many cousins --- a family whose patriarch was someone of great fame --- a patriarch who would have a descendent who would change the world --- a family that we call the House of David.

Our reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel tells of David wanting to build a temple for God, a place to house the Ark of the Covenant, rather than a tent as had been true since the time of Moses.

God cuts David's plans short by sending the prophet Nathan to him to tell him that someone else will build the temple later. Instead David is told "The Lord will make you a house" but this doesn't mean a structure – it means a royal house, a kingdom that David's descendants, his cousins if you will, will rule for ever. The physical temple will not be built in David's lifetime. Solomon will do that, but the House of David, his extended family, will continue to future generations.

Our reading from Psalm 89 is God's covenant with David to do exactly that, to continue the House of David until one of his future distant cousins, the Messiah, Jesus the Christ, is born. This psalm is a lament that addresses God's promises to David. The psalmist is calling those promises into question.

In the Psalm, God is being reminded that he promised David that his descendants would rule for ever, that the throne of David would continue for generations. But that was not happening. David ruled from 1000 AD to 961 AD and his son Solomon was king until 922 AD. Then the kingdom split into two parts, Judah and Israel, and eventually both fell and the Temple of Solomon was destroyed.

According to Fred Craddock and others commenting on Psalm 89, "*The ancient Hebrews were not bashful when it came to reminding God of his divine commitments and to reiterating the promises on which they banked their hopes.*"

The Psalm reminds God that he said, "*I have bestowed strength on a warrior; I have raised up a young man from among the people. I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him. My hand will sustain him; surely my arm will strengthen him.*" (NIV). The promise continues and the tone of the Psalm effectively is saying, 'Darn it God. You promised. Keep your word!'"

Again quoting Fred Craddock and others, *“This psalm, like Advent, calls on people to rely on divine promises even when those promises seem to be shattered at the feet of those who pray, but who pray for the coming redemption in spite of the realities within which they live.”*

God did keep the promises which he made to David, but he did so in a totally unexpected way. That is the story related to us in our Gospel reading from Luke, a story which really talks about two Holy cousins, Jesus of Nazareth and John the Baptizer. No one in that day and age would ever have imagined how God would keep his promise nor would they have imagined the significance of another member of Mary and Joseph’s family who would give birth to Jesus’ cousin John or of God’s plans for both babies.

The people had expected God to keep his promise by bringing a new ruler over Israel from the House of David, one who would reestablish the Kingdom and drive out the Romans. What they didn’t understand was that the new king, the Messiah, was not going to be that kind of ruler; instead he would be the one to bring them salvation and everlasting life, not in the Kingdom of Israel but in God’s Kingdom.

And how did God do that?

He sent an angel, Gabriel, to tell a virgin named Mary that she would give birth to the Messiah and also that her relative Elizabeth would give birth to the Messiah’s cousin, John the Baptizer who was to be Jesus’ messenger to the world --- two Holy cousins --- one to announce the arrival of the true King and the other to become the fulfillment of God’s promise.

I told you last week about John the Baptizer and there is no need for me to relate that story again. But what about the other cousin, the one who was to be King?

The new King would not be a military leader but instead would lead the world on the path of salvation. He would be the Son of the living God.

Interestingly enough, Mary herself was not of the House of David. How then, if she was a virgin, could her baby be from the House of David? Mary was engaged to Joseph who was a descendant of David but Mary was not. The answer to that apparent inconsistency is in the culture of the day. In Biblical times, the family line was not necessarily by blood. If a child was adopted or was born to the wife of someone who was not the baby’s human father, that child nevertheless was considered to be of the

husband's line. In the patriarchal culture of the times, lineage passed through the male line of a family, from father to son even if the father was not the natural father of a child. Culturally, Mary and Joseph were married even though they did not live together. Betrothal lasted for at least a year before a formal marriage but, even so, the couple was considered to be married already. Hence, when Mary gave birth to Jesus, he was legally Joseph's son and since Joseph was of the House of David, Jesus was also.

Today, we would not consider family relationships that way but in interpreting anything Biblical you must do so in consideration of Biblical times. What we do today, and how we interpret things, is not necessarily how things would have been interpreted 2000 years ago.

That said; let me conclude this message by restating our Gospel passage from Luke. After all, what is said in that passage is why we are celebrating Advent right now. Listen to the Word of the Lord once more, this time in the beautiful, poetic and contemporary language of Eugene Peterson's *The Message*:

*In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her:*

*Good morning!*

*You're beautiful with God's beauty,*

*Beautiful inside and out!*

*God be with you.*

*She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.*

*He will be great,*

*be called 'Son of the Highest.'*

*The Lord God will give him*

*the throne of his father David;*

*He will rule Jacob's house forever—*

*no end, ever, to his kingdom."*

*Mary said to the angel, "But how? I've never slept with a man."*

*The angel answered,  
The Holy Spirit will come upon you,  
the power of the Highest hover over you;  
Therefore, the child you bring to birth  
will be called Holy, Son of God.*

*"And did you know that your cousin Elizabeth conceived a son, old as she is? Everyone called her barren, and here she is six months pregnant! Nothing, you see, is impossible with God." And Mary said,*

*Yes, I see it all now:  
I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve.  
Let it be with me just as you say.*

God kept his promise to David and two Holy cousins were born, one to tell the world of the coming of the King, the other to rule on David's throne. Trust in God's promises. They are always kept.

Thanks be to God. **Amen!**

(Note: Scripture references are from the New International Version of the Bible except as noted)