

Preacher: Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey

Scripture: Malachi 4, Matthew 1:1-17

“How much would you pay for what's behind this door?” This is the motto for *Storage Wars*, a popular reality TV show. In certain states, when rent on a storage locker goes negligent for three months, the owner of the storage facility can sell the contents off in an auction. On auction day, the door of the unit is opened for a short period of time for potential buyers to peek inside. They're allowed neither to enter the unit nor to touch any of its contents. They have to guess, based only on this brief glimpse of what lies inside, what the contents may be worth. The drama comes when the winning bidder is finally able to work through the contents of the storage unit. The question is: will the winning bid on the unit be higher than the resale value of the items inside? Sometimes the answer is yes, other times no.¹

In some ways, we are like these buyers of a storage locker, peering in through the open door of the New Testament trying to access what all it contains knowing the value of what we've just encounter in the Old Testament. Only in knowing how the New Testament relates to the Old Testament can we fully appreciate the value of its contents. Although the New Testament stories may be more familiar to us than the Old Testament stories we just explored, I hope you are eager to begin to see the connections between the two testaments and how they relate. We are closing the door on the Old Testament and opening the door to the New Testament. But it really isn't quite that simple. The Old Testament gave us glimpses and a foundation for what is to come in the New Testament.

Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament in Christian bibles. It concludes with words of prophecy telling of a time when the righteous will be joyful, and the evildoers will get what is coming to them. The writer of Malachi urges the people to remember the teachings of Moses—to remember the statues and ordinances that they have learned so that they can be among the righteous. Then to further remind Israel of their past, the author explains that Elijah will come before the day of the Lord to deliver judgment and punishment to those who have forgotten the Lord.

Biblical scholars believe Malachi was written in response to concerns raised by the people of Israel related to unfulfilled prophecy. Typically dated to the Persian period, meaning after the exile when the Persians took over Babylon, the audience of Malachi was a free Israel, but they were still a conquered people under foreign rule. The messianic hope that the early prophets spoke of had yet to be realized. No ancestor of David had been able to reestablish the autonomy they had prior to the exile. So, Malachi, unable to point to this prophecy fulfilled, attempts to bolster their faith by reminding them that the day is still coming.²

It is with this hope for future justice, while remembering the teachings of the past, that the Old Testament closes. The Old Testament doesn't end with a resolution or a final and satisfactory “the end” but with a “to be continued.” The day is coming but is not yet here.

Closing the door to the Old Testament, we open the door to the New Testament with hope for an answer to the longing left unsatisfied and unfulfilled by the Hebrew scriptures.

When we turn the page to the New Testament, we get a familiar literary device opening the Gospel of Matthew—one we experienced a lot in our Old Testament reading: a list, and more specifically a genealogy. Lists and genealogies are easy to skip over, but they tell something

¹ homileticonline.com

² Malachi 3:13-4:3: A Book of Remembrance for God-fearers by Pamela Scalise

important. Richard Gardner reminds us that genealogies in scriptures answer important questions: “Where did it all begin? Who is connected to whom? Who has the right credentials? Through whom does God fulfill promises?”³ Each person named in the genealogy of Jesus teaches us about foundational characteristics of Christ and his ministry, as well as who God is and how God works through people.

The genealogy here in Matthew follows a typical pattern—so-and-so begat so-and-so begat so-and-so, etc. Many of these names are hopefully familiar to you: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Tamar, Rahab, Boaz and Ruth, Jesse, King David, and King Solomon. Even some of the less well-known names may spark your memory for stories and significant events in the life of the people of God that we’ve already read. All of these stories lead to one person.

When the genealogy reaches its climax in the birth of Jesus, the pattern changes. Verse 16 says “Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.” Jesus’ identity, while deeply connected to the history of Israel, concluding with Mary and Joseph, is ultimately determined by the title Messiah or Christ. The Gospel of Matthew then reveals through the rest of its words the implications of this title regarding who Jesus was and is. However, the author Matthew wants us to know that “Jesus is the heir to all the promises of God which shaped the story of Israel,”⁴ and those who belong to Christ’s community are also heirs to the promises given to Israel.

As we read the names of the ancestors of Jesus, we should be startled by some of the people included. For example, three women are named: Tamar, Rahab and Ruth. Each one of these women is not the type of characters you would expect in the genealogy of the son of God. Tamar seduced her father-in law; Rahab is the famed prostitute of Jericho; and Ruth took rather unusual steps on the threshing floor to pursue Boaz.⁵ Bathsheba is also referenced as Solomon’s mother. By not using her name and calling her the “wife of Uriah,” Matthew makes it clear that some shady business took place. You remember the story: King David gets Bathsheba pregnant and sends her husband Uriah to the front lines of battle so that he is sure to be killed. Not a glamorous moment in Israel’s history, yet it is included in Jesus’ genealogy.

While Matthew goes through the painstaking process of orderly laying out the three sets of fourteen generations from Abraham to Jesus, we also notice a bit of chaos in this ancestral history. This may lead us to ask ourselves if God works in a predictable and orderly or surprising way. Matthew’s genealogy invites us to see that both might be partly true. God works in history in both orderly and disruptive ways. As we read the New Testament, we will see how God continues the long arch of faith history begun in the Old Testament, but we will also see how God breaks with tradition. We will hear phrases like “all this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophets” which builds on the words of the Old Testament. But we will also hear “you have heard it said... but I say” pointing to a shift in teaching and even law. What does this say about how God continues to act even now? How does God reaffirm existing structures and how does God radically break with tradition.

A father and son once stood looking at the familiar painting entitled “Christ At the Door Knocking,” an image of Jesus waiting on the threshold of a house alluding to Christ knocking on the door from Revelation 3. In hopes of beginning a conversation about faith and welcoming Christ, the father said to the boy as they looked at the picture, “I wonder why they won’t let him

³ Matthew: Believers Church Commentary by Richard Gardner (pg. 33)

⁴ Matthew: Believers Church Commentary by Richard Gardner (pg. 33)

⁵ Matthew: Believers Church Commentary by Richard Gardner (pg. 30)

in.” After a moment of thought, the boy replied, “I’ll bet they’re down in the basement, and they can’t hear him knocking.”

As we close the door of the Old Testament and open the door to the New Testament, may we hear Christ knocking on the door of our hearts knowing that letting him in also has the potential to radically break down our existing structures. If we can allow Christ across the threshold of our hearts, our lives will change as Jesus brings with him and calls us to love all the unsavory characters we encounter in the pages of the New Testament: prostitutes, tax collectors, betrayers, the poor, the broken, the sick, the unclean. May we, with excitement, encounter again some of these familiar stories with fresh ears and eyes.

The door to the Old Testament isn’t truly closed. We will see the writers of the New Testament often reopen the door as they try to make sense of what God is doing in their time and place. Likewise, we are invited to draw connections and see the continuing scope of God’s work in the world as well as the differences in how God relates to humanity. In the narrative, instruction and prophecy of the New Testament, we will see a God that both continues the tradition of the Old Testament and acts in new ways through a new covenant with humanity in the body and blood of Jesus the Christ.

In a prayer from an accompaniment to the Common Book of Prayer, the author writes: “Help me to listen to these signs of change, of growth; help me to listen seriously and follow where they lead through the breathtaking empty space of an open door.” May we too, as we make our way through the New Testament, listen and follow Christ through the breathtaking view at the threshold of this open door. Open the door, and let Christ enter in. Amen.