

[Slide] We are not going to go through this in its entirety, but I want to summarize the passage from Matthew 1 that I hope made for some interesting discussion in the Advent Bible study I held at Coolidge this past Tuesday afternoon; it is the genealogy of Jesus through Joseph (I know, Joseph was not really the father), beginning with the “first” Jew, Abraham, from whom are descended by legend all Jews, and continuing through the great king of one thousand years before Jesus, David, through a total of 41 generations to Jesus himself.

And we shall return to that later.

I do not know if I have shared this before, but a standard *modus operandi* for me, especially on those delightful occasions when I would lecture to or conduct a college class, was to walk to the front of the room, remove my jacket, and unbutton and partly roll-up my shirt sleeves. Although I had by the time of the event I am going to describe several times been a visiting lecturer at the business school at Valparaiso University, in the Indiana town of that name, I had never lectured to a class involving my younger son, Stephen, who graduated from there in 1990.

One time during the '90's, when he was living and working in a western Chicago suburb, one of the Valpo professors invited my late wife, Carol, and me to attend an evening class at which Steve would be the guest speaker.

Guess how Steve began his lecture? I nearly fell out of my chair watching him ape my very moves — which he had never seen!

Was it a coincidence? Or was it in his genes?

I have not taken one of those genetic tests they advertise on the satellite radio transmission of the news, “23 and Me,” so I don't know if my genetic test results would come back saying I have a propensity to remove my jacket and roll up my cuffs. It seems — and this was a brief topic of last Tuesday's Bible study in Florence — there is

a tendency among behavioral scientists, evolutionary psychologists and the like, basically to say that everything we do is programmed into our genetic make-up.

Were the sixteenth-century French lawyer who gave rise to Presbyterianism, John Calvin, alive, he might nod, "I told you so." Calvin is infamous for the doctrine, which did not originate with him, of *predestination*; while properly speaking, *predestination* referred to the determination before our birth of whether we were "saved" — please don't ask me to define that right now, — it has often been carried to extremes that would suggest everything in our lives has already been determined, that we do not have free will, we only think we do. The theological joke that I have not used for some time is about the Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian ministers who were walking down the sidewalk when all three fell into the road. The Lutheran, being a good believer in God's grace, got up, dusted himself off, and said, "Thank you, God." The Methodist — Methodists believe in our progressing nearer to following God's will every day — got up, dusted himself off, and said, "I'll have to try harder next time." The Presbyterian got up, dusted himself off, and said, "I'm glad that's over with."

But even in that humorous story, it was not the genes, the inherited human traits, that had anything to do with the Presbyterian's perspective.

We encounter an interesting conflict of sorts in our Hebrew Bible and Gospel lessons today. For Jesus' audience and most certainly for the audience of the Gospel of Matthew, which was written for Jewish converts to Christianity and to persuade Jews that they should follow Jesus because he was from the lineage of David, two-thirds of the "begat's" of chapter 1 of Matthew is for the purpose of evidencing Jesus' having David's *genes* — forget the contradiction with the idea of virgin birth. And of course, in our reading from Isaiah, a fairly well known reading, the expectation of a special king is that this king would spring from the same roots as David; Jesse was David's father.

In other words, for the Messiah, at least viewed through Jewish eyes, the genes mattered.

But notice with whom the genealogy of Jesus through Joseph begins: Abraham, the first person of faith from whom, if we want to be Old Testament about it, all are descended, but, more importantly, all Jews are descended. All Jews are said to have Abraham's genes.

But that these genes from Abraham are not enough for you and me is made clear in the combative words of John the Baptizer with which we opened worship today: [Slide]

⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹ Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Genes are not enough! Our Christian inheritance is not enough.

By now you all know I am not big on the "fire" business, but the point is, there is something more: it might have been that the Jews expected someone with Jesse's genes to be the Messiah, but it clearly was not those genes that made Jesus the messiah; similarly, having Abraham's genes would not by itself make one worthy of . . . of,

Well, if I am not concerned with one's burning in fire, of what is it that one might not be worthy?

How about, of being called "a follower of Christ"? Even if we were raised in good Christian families, even if we have all our lives been church-goers, even if we as a church are "hanging on," are we worthy of being called "followers of Christ" just because of from whom we have inherited our faith or our church?

And does it matter? As I said last week, I am driven to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ not out of concern with some punishing fire, but out of desire for all to have a different kind of fire, the Holy Spirit with which John says Jesus will baptize us, [Slide] that Holy Spirit that comes to all who, in the words of the Apostle Paul, [Slide] *confess with their lips and believe in their hearts that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead!*

Being raised in a Christian family and attending church are a good inheritance, they might provide some needed genes, but it is not by genes alone but by the convictions of our hearts that we become followers of Christ.

And if we become followers of Christ, we want to put away selfish concerns about our own comfort and convenience in our belief — I believe there is no real conviction in our hearts if we fail to do this — and set out to spread that good news to others!

(I have to offer an aside; I shall shortly comment on, ahem, your and my ages, some of you being too old actively to carry the Good News into the world. Yet it is something we do -- and a major reason for why we claim to be, a "church" and not a club. One of my responsibilities is to be you both to those of our church family who are temporarily in hospitals or rehab or more permanently in, for example, assisted living. In making a visit this past week to an elderly woman who had been in the Florence congregation but now lives in an assisted living home in Chandler, sitting next to her was a woman who several times gently and not rudely injected into our conversation. When I got up to say a prayer and leave, that woman got up and came over, shook my hand and thanked me for helping her understand about church. That was a privilege, but it was you who were doing that which is why I think truly being a church matters.)

So to return, there is nothing in our genes that precludes us from being evangelists for the one the celebration of whose earthly birth we anticipate this Advent season. Our parents might have been church-goers, or they might have been agnostics but . . .

Hold on a moment. Whatever genes we might have been bequeathed that led us to be here this morning apparently expire over a generation or two. Look around you; how many people do you see who are not retired? The generations that followed us did not inherit church-going genes, that is for sure, but the more important issue is, "Have they inherited the faith gene?"

Interestingly, while moderating the presbytery's Commission on Ministry this past week, we had some discussion about our presbytery's minimum compensation for pastors; I recommended not changing it because, I noted, those on Social Security would receive only a 0.3 percent increase in benefits this January (inflation has been low), and then asked our presbytery pastor, Brad Munroe, how many of the members of churches in our presbytery are retirees?

"Fifty percent." Fifty percent are retired, which says only fifty percent are less than of retirement age, which means that not only we but many others who consider themselves Followers of Christ have not passed on very good faith and church genes.

Is it too late? As we celebrate the season in which we await the arrival of Jesus, we can complain all we want about people's reluctance to say, "Merry Christmas," but can we avoid responsibility for the secularization of which we are a part? Are we faithful followers?

I do not know how it was that my son, Stephen — for whom I can probably thank my daughter-in-law, Krista, that he seems to have the faith and church genes, I do not know how it was that Steve ended up following my habit of rolling up his sleeves, but I think that we all need to roll up our sleeves and determine to be followers of Christ, meaning that we will use Advent to rededicate ourselves to being disciples individually and as church and, individually and as church, giving rise to new disciples, baptizing all in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

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And if we can do that, the inheritance we leave will be pleasing in the sight of our Lord and Savior.

Amen