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Rick Myatt

THE LESSON OF THE SURFING LESSON

Matthew 1:1-17

Philip Yancey was invited to speak at a conference on ministry to women in prostitution. He agreed as long as he could have the opportunity to talk to the women and hear their stories. At the end of that time he said he had one more question. He quoted Jesus saying to the religious leaders of his day, “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.” Yancey asked, “What do you think Jesus meant? Why did he single out prostitutes?”

No one said anything for a bit, then a young woman spoke up in broken English. She said, “Everyone, she has someone to look down on. Not us. We are at the low. Our families, they feel shame for us. No mother looks at her little girl and says, ‘Honey, when you grow up I want you to be good prostitute.’ Most places, we are breaking the law. Believe me, we know how people feel about us. People call us names: whore, slut, hooker, harlot. We feel it too. We are at the bottom. And sometimes when you are at the low, you cry for help. So when Jesus comes, we respond. Maybe Jesus meant that.”

You can feel the terrible pain in that answer, and you can also sense the desperate need for the grace of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is good news. Luke 2:10 says when the angels announced to the shepherds the birth of Jesus they said, “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.” This wasn’t just some good news. It was news so good that it would cause not just joy, but great joy for people. It would not be for only a few lucky, elite people, it would be for everyone. If it isn’t good news for everyone, including people whom some might claim are undeserving, then it isn’t good news for anyone. That’s because there’s a problem for all of us when it comes to the meaning of “deserving.” This was such a momentous event, such almost unbelievably good news, that 2000 years later it is our country’s biggest celebration. Today we will get a reminder of just how good that news is by looking at the very beginning of the story of Jesus, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. Let’s look at a curious passage, Matthew 1:1-17.

MATTHEW’S BIOGRAPHY HAD AN UNUSUAL BEGINNING

This book is a biography of Jesus Christ, the pivotal person of history. This is the story of a unique individual. There has been no one else like him in all of human history. The story is maybe not a beach read, but it is exciting. It has drama, humor, some of the most profound wisdom of all time, tension, dramatic, some almost comic book super hero type events, victories, defeats, pathos, a great hero, a tragic, heartbreaking death, but a mind blowing climax. And Matthew begins his story with…a genealogy!

Experts tell you that it is good to start a book with a hook, some fascinating story that will quickly draw the reader’s interest. In the case of a biography you might want to start with some dramatic story from the life of the subject that will capture the attention of the audience. And Matthew leads with “Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers.” Wow, that is fascinating stuff. No doubt you’ve been waiting breathlessly to learn that Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, who was the father of Zerubbabel, who was the father of Abihud, the father of Eliakim. Oh, come on, surely you’ve always wanted to know that Azor was the father of Zadok, right? What a strange way to start what should be an exciting biography.

The first part of the book after the genealogy is a classic hook. It is the story of how Jesus was born. Matthew says Mary had a child implanted in her directly by God. Matthew said Joseph, her husband to be, didn’t buy that absurd story for a nanosecond, until an angel showed up and said, “It’s all true, Joe. So marry her and name the son Jesus.” Now that’s an attention getting story. Doesn’t it make you think, “Can that possibly be true? If it is, I want to know what happened to that kid.” Why didn’t Matthew lead with that? Doesn’t it seem like he buried the lead?

First, we need to remember that Matthew wrote for a particular audience. He had first century Jewish people in mind, not 21st century Californians. We find this stuff as dry as talcum powder, but his readers were fascinated by this kind of thing. The ancient Jews liked genealogies like this, which is why you see them in the Old Testament a lot. They loved to pick names out of genealogies and create stories about the people pretty much from pure imagination. So this worked for them.

But genealogies were important to them for another reason. It established the credentials of the subject of the biography, in this case, Jesus. It affirmed that Jesus was in fact a descendant of King David, which had to be true of him if he were to be the Messiah. That’s important for us to know, but this genealogy also does something else for us. It roots Jesus Christ in real life history. He was from a real live family. This reminds us that he was a real person who lived in the real world.

There is another surprising thing about this genealogy. I will read parts of it and see if you can catch what it is. Verse 3 mentions “Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.” Then in verse 5 we see “Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth.” Verse 6 refers to “David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah’s wife.” Then there’s verse 16. “Jacob is the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus, who is called the Messiah.”

Compare that with this list from Nehemiah 11:4-6. “From the descendants of Judah: Athaiah son of Uzziah, the son of Zechariah, the son of Amariah, the son of Shephatiah, the son of Mahalalel, a descendant of Perez; and Maaseiah son of Baruch, the son of Kol-Hozeh, the son of Hazaiah, the son of Adaiah…” You get the idea. What jumps out is that in those genealogies in the Old Testament only men are listed. They are all sons, meaning they were all dudes. Matthew mentioned Tamar, the mother of Perez and Zerah, Rahab, the mother of Boaz, Ruth the mother of Obed, and Solomon’s mother, who had been Uriah’s wife. In other words, Bathsheba. Finally there is Mary, the wife of Joseph and mother of Jesus. In ancient Israel this was unusual. Women were not listed in genealogies most of the time. That’s because those ancient societies were deeply male dominated, and in that chauvinistic context women didn’t matter.

We know that women matter a ton. All those ancient male chauvinists had mothers, and their mothers were all women. No women, no male chauvinists. But my point here is not to criticize those societies. It is to point out that Matthew went out of his way to do something unusual in his world. In a way it would have distracted from his case for Jesus. But in the act of doing that he did something that helps us today. It gives us confidence that he is telling the truth. Just including the women in the genealogy in that day has that effect, but especially the women he chose to highlight makes it obvious that he wanted us to know that he wasn’t hiding or sugar coating anything. He was like Sergeant Friday on the ancient TV show *Dragnet*. He always said, “Just the facts, Maam.” Matthew is telling the facts. That becomes glaringly obvious when we look at the women he included in this genealogy. Remember, he could have left them out, because that would have been expected. The fact that he mentioned them shouts that they are important. There is a message in the women he included in this genealogy.

JESUS’ FAMILY TREE IS SHOCKING

The first woman he identified was Tamar. This poor woman was treated badly by the men of Judah, the line of Messiah. The story is embarrassing and was given an R rating by the MPAA. She married the oldest son of Judah. His name was Er, which proved to be appropriate (because it sounds like err). Genesis 38:7 says this guy was so bad that the Lord “put him to death.” Think of all the horrible men who have ever lived. There have been some real monsters. Few, if any, could lay claim to what happened to Er. He was so bad God had to take him off the chess board. Strike one, Tamar. In ancient Israel a widow was in a tough spot because women couldn’t own land, and land was the source of wealth. It would be like today if a woman wasn’t allowed to have a bank account or a credit card or a job. So God had a protection for widows. If woman’s husband died when she had no sons, her former husband’s brother was to sleep with her and get her pregnant, until she had a son. The son could inherit the land and thus provide wealth for the family. But Er’s brother, Onan, wanted no part of that deal. He didn’t mind sleeping with the woman, but he was not willing to make sure she got pregnant. If she had a son, her son would be the oldest in the family and would get a double share of the inheritance, so his child would get less. So he refused to obey the Law of God. Turns out he was as bad as his brother, so God punched his ticket too. Strike two for Tamar. Judah had one more son, Shelah. To make a long story short Judah refused to have Shelah “marry” Tamar. In his mind, she’d already cost him two sons, no way he was going to let her have a crack at the last one. Tamar was left with no way to support herself. That was strike three for poor Tamar.

This is where things really go sideways. Tamar figured out she was never going to get help from Judah, so she took matters into her own hand. Her father-in-law headed for a town called Timnah to have his sheep sheared. Turns out that sheep-shearing time in Timnah was an ancient equivalent of a convention in Las Vegas, and, as we all know, what happens in Timnah, stays in Timnah. At least that’s what Judah thought. Not long before his trip to Vegas, er, Timnah, his wife had died. Obviously overcome with grief, Judah decided he would ease his sorrow by finding a prostitute in Timnah, because hey, it’s Timnah. Who’s going to know back home? What happens in Timnah, stays in Timnah. He found a prostitute to his liking and negotiated a deal with her. He didn’t have any cash with him and apparently she didn’t take credit cards, so he promised to give her a goat as payment for her services. To guarantee he would pay up he gave her his seal, cord and staff, to be returned when she got the goat. That was kind of like him leaving his driver’s license and credit card. After the convention he went home. When he sent an employee back to find the prostitute, pay her and retrieve Judah’s credit card and license, she was nowhere to be found. Three months later Judah was told that his daughter-in-law, Tamar, was pregnant, and thus assumed to be guilty of prostitution. Judah, that godly man, ordered that she be executed! He could sleep with a prostitute, but she should die for being a prostitute. Yeah, no double standard there. However, his foul plan came to a screeching halt. She had a servant deliver to him his seal, cord and staff and tell him she was pregnant by the man who owns these. Uh oh. She had dressed up as a prostitute in Timnah. It’s a pretty loud statement that she knew if she posed as a prostitute she could get Judah to sleep with her. That says an awful lot about him. But the end of this sordid tale is that Tamar seduced her father-in-law, and her son, Perez, from that encounter was an ancestor of Jesus the Messiah! Yikes.

But wait. There’s more! The next woman in the batting order was Rahab. Where have I heard that name before? Oh, wait, I know. When Israel was finally going to invade the Promised Land, the first obstacle was the fortress city of Jericho. They sent a couple of men in on a recon mission to scope out things in Jericho, but somehow word got out that the spies were in town. A man hunt ensued, but the two Mossad agents escaped. They didn’t do it on their own. They were hidden by a local woman named Rahab, who also helped them get safely out of town. Cool, she’s kind of a hero. Yes, she was. But she was also a Canaanite. Oh, she was also a prostitute. What is it with the prostitutes in this list? So now we have a woman who pretended to be a prostitute in order to seduce her father-in-law and get pregnant by him, and the genuine article, a real prostitute, and a Gentile one at that, who are ancestors of Messiah.

Sheesh, this isn’t going all that great, but then we get to Ruth. She wasn’t a prostitute or a prostitute wannabe was she? No, at least we didn’t have that. However, she was a Moabite. That doesn’t sound too bad. Well, no, except Deuteronomy 23:3 said, “No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord.” Later both Nehemiah and Ezra would condemn the Israeli men of their day for marrying foreign women, including those from Moab. But an Israeli man did marry Ruth. Unfortunately for her, he died. What is it with these husbands dying? She ended up marrying Boaz, another Israeli, who married her despite her Gentile ethnicity. I suspect she must have been a real looker to have all these Jewish guys lining up to marry her. The one knock on Ruth is that she was Gentile, not Jewish.

Batting clean up in this order is none other than Bathsheba. She is famous for committing adultery with King David, and sticking with him even after she had her husband killed to cover up what he had done. We can’t really condemn her because in that day kings could do whatever they wanted. She didn’t have a choice. Still, Solomon, the son born to Bathsheba and David, was the product of adultery and murder. And he was in the line of Messiah.

The genealogy ends with Mary. She was heroic, but that was not how she was always viewed in her day. People only knew she got pregnant before she married Joseph, and generally they assumed the worst. Understandable. What would you think if you knew a teenage girl got pregnant when not married? It’s a miracle! That’s probably not your first thought.

So there you have it. Matthew could have skipped the women altogether in the genealogy. If he wanted to make a point by having the names of women included, he could have chosen to highlight some of the heroic women of the Old Testament like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel or others. Instead he specifically mentioned a woman who posed as a prostitute to seduce her father in law, a Gentile prostitute, another Gentile and a woman who committed adultery. Do you think that was coincidental? I think he had his reasons, and those reasons that have important implications for us today.

IMPLICATIONS

GOD CAN REDEEM ANYONE

We have already seen that one message we can take from this unusual bit of the Bible is that Matthew was telling the truth. He is about to tell the story of Jesus, and is going to show him to be the perfect man. He is truly good, with no hidden faults. There is no wrong in him. It might be easy to think this was a PR job. Jesus’ follower has whitewashed the blemishes that exist in every human being. He’s done the first century equivalent of photo shopping out any flaws. But right from the start it is apparent that Matthew did not do that. If that’s what he was doing he absolutely would not have said, “Hey, look at the people this guy came from. His ancestors included Gentile women, prostitutes and adulterers.” The fact that he highlighted these women tells us that he was telling the truth about Jesus.

However, beyond that we can see that the message here is that no one is beyond God’s reach. Judah apparently was far from godly. He refused to obey God’s Law in the way he treated Tamar, who was a woman that certainly should have elicited pity. She was twice widowed and powerless, but Judah treated her terribly. Then he sought a prostitute and used her, directly contrary to God’s will. Then when he learned that Tamar was pregnant, apparently because she did the same thing Judah did, he insisted she be executed. Right up to the moment he realized that he was the father of her child. He doesn’t exactly come off as a noble, stand up guy. Yet in Revelation 5:5 Jesus is called “the Lion of Judah.” Somehow God used Judah.

Tamar seduced her father in law by pretending to be a prostitute, and yet God used her in his plan. Rahab was a prostitute, but she was part of God’s plan. Ruth was a Gentile, an outcast, and she became the great grandmother of King David, and an ancestor of Messiah. Bathsheba committed adultery, and she too was a direct ancestor of Messiah. None of these people were outside of the power of God’s grace and his ability to redeem people.

Jesus said, “Come to me, you who are weary and burdened.” He said the kingdom of God belonged not to the influential, the respectable, the good religious people. It belonged to the poor in spirit. It belonged to those who admit their souls are impoverished and that they have nothing to recommend them to God. It belongs to those who know the ugly truth about themselves and throw themselves on God’s grace and mercy as their only hope. That means that the good news is good for everyone, no matter who they are.

There is an obvious reason why this message would have mattered to Matthew. He was just like the prostitutes and adulterers he mentioned. People in his society thought that he would have to get better to be like the prostitutes and adulterers. He was a Roman tax collector, which meant he was a traitor to his own people and an extortionist and a cheat. He was as low as it is possible to get. That God used Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba in his plans, that he redeemed them, meant there was hope for Matthew too, that God could redeem him and use him in his great plan.

Thomas Tarrants grew up in Alabama in a racist, segregated society of the 1960’s. As a young man he read some white supremacist, anti-Semitic, anti-Communist literature that was circulating in his high school. He was sure that the civil rights movement was part of a Communist plot. Soon his fears turned into hatred. He became involved with the violent White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. One night he and an accomplice were attempting to plant a bomb at the home of a Jewish business man when the police ambushed them. His partner was killed and he was critically wounded. The doctors said it would be a miracle if he survived another 45 minutes. Yet to the astonishment of the doctors he lived. He was convicted and sentenced to 30 years in prison. After 6 months in prison he escaped with 2 other inmates. But 2 days later the authorities caught up with them and there was a blazing gun battle. One of his accomplices was killed and Tarrants was apprehended. He was sent back to prison and put in solitary confinement. To keep from going crazy he read continuously. Eventually he got around to reading the New Testament. As he read his eyes were opened. He grew convicted of all the hate and violence that had been in his heart and life. He realized he needed forgiveness, so he knelt on the concrete floor of his cell and asked Jesus to forgive him and to take over his life. As he continued to read the Bible, a whole new world opened up to him. He was delivered from hate and love began to grow in his heart. He developed friendships with black inmates and others who were different from him. After 8 years in prison, through some extraordinary events, he was paroled so he could go to college. He eventually went into campus ministry, then pastoral ministry in a racially diverse church, then to a ministry of teaching and writing at the C. S. Lewis Institute. God’s grace could redeem a man that full of hate.

No matter who we are, we bring to God the same thing that Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, those messianic bad girls, brought. It is not our achievements, our personal merit, the fact that our good supposedly outweighs our bad. It is our admission of our unworthiness and our dependence upon God’s grace and kindness to us through Christ. And that is all that is required. This is why Jesus came to this world.

GOD CAN MAKE SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL OUT OF A MESS

I wonder what it must have been like when Perez and his brother Zerah asked their Mom, Tamar, about how she and dad got together. How do you suppose that conversation went? Well, boys, Dad wasn’t being very nice to me. In fact, he was cheating me, and I was desperate. So I dressed up like a prostitute. The boys interrupt, what’s a prostitute, Mom? Um, never mind. Anyway, we met in a town called Timnah, and that’s sort of where we got married. Eventually that must have been a really awkward conversation. However, the fact that we have that story today tells us that it did get passed along. At some point that conversation must have happened.

Can you imagine Boaz asking his mom, Rahab, about her life before she met Dad. Um, I was in the hospitality industry, son. I wonder if her checkered Gentile past had anything to do with why Boaz seemed to have no problem with marrying Ruth, another Gentile. How do you think it went when Solomon asked his mom how she and Dad got together? Well, one night when my husband was deployed on the front lines, I was taking a bath…Yeah, boy, it gets really awkward from that point on. Do you think Solomon ever asked Mom what happened to her first husband? My point here is these situations were major ugly messes. But God somehow made something amazingly good out of them. Out of those terrible human foul-ups, God brought the Messiah who would bring hope to us all.

Do you ever feel like you have really messed up? Do you ever feel like still, despite your best efforts, fall so far short of what you ought to be, and that at this point you have no hope it’s ever going to get better? Well how do you compare with the messes you see in the lives of Judah, Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba? I suspect you have done a little better than those. God was able to take colossal mess ups by people and make something astoundingly good, something awesome and truly beautiful out of them. I think Matthew wanted us to know that because he wants us to know that no matter what we have done, he can turn it into something awesome and beautiful. We are not hopeless.

Few people have messed up like Saul of Tarsus. He was one of the most religious people that has ever lived. He knew the Hebrew Scriptures literally backward and forward, because he knew them in both Hebrew, which is read from right to left, and in Greek, which is read from left to right. He was one of the foremost experts on the Hebrew Scriptures and the Law of Moses of his day. When it came to commitment and zeal, he was second to none. He was more avid in his pursuit of religion than anyone. He went on a campaign, a rampage really, to destroy the heresy of the followers of Jesus. The very thought of that cult enraged him. He hounded and persecuted them relentlessly. And then the formerly dead Jesus confronted him. The Jesus he so hated was God in human form! The people he hated so and treated so terribly, were actually believing in the one true God. In his effort to serve God, he had become a virulent opponent of God. In 1 Timothy 1:15 he described himself as “the worst of sinners.” Rank sinners in order of how bad they were, he would be number 1. That’s what I call being messed up. He had fouled up as badly as it is possible to foul up. And God was able to make that mess into something awesome. He was able to turn that man into the apostle of grace. However you have messed up, God can make it beautiful.

Foul ups happen in our lives. There are times when we seem to go totally sideways. No doubt it felt that way to Tamar, big time. I suspect it also felt like that to Bathsheba. Writer Philip Yancey says, “To those who love God, nothing ‘irredeemable’ can happen to you. No matter who you are, nothing can separate you from the love of God.”

GOD WANTS TO MAKE US A GRACE-FULL COMMUNITY

Recently when Laurie and I were on vacation we took a walk one day on a beach right at a place where quite a few years ago we had taken the only surfing lesson we have ever had. I was reminded of this because there was a group of 4 people who were having a surfing lesson as we walked by. It made me think about our surf lesson. This happened on Maui. Maui isn’t quite the surf Mecca that Oahu and even Kauai are. It is famous for a couple of surf spots, but Maui is surrounded by 3 other islands, Molokai, Lanai and Kahoolawe. They block most of the swells so there’s often not great surf on much of the island. But there are gaps between those islands, and if there is a swell from just the right direction it can come through the gap and bring good surf to Maui. The day Laurie and I were scheduled for our lesson we learned in the morning that just such a swell had arrived. Many people were excited about the big surf. We didn’t think that was a great thing for us as beginners. We thought about cancelling our lesson. But we were assured the surf would not be a problem. Our lesson would take place in a location where there would only be gentle waves. So cowabunga, let’s go surfing. There were about 6 of us in the group the day we had our lesson. Laurie was the best in the class. She was a natural. She got up on the board and rode a wave on her first attempt, and she looked graceful doing it. I wiped out on my first attempt, but on my second try I stood up and rode the wave like a pro. Well, maybe not like a pro. The truth is, I didn’t look graceful like Laurie did. I looked like a troll on a surfboard. But I rode the wave. And I was also successful on every attempt after that, so I think I did pretty well, even if I do say so myself.

Some of the others in our group did not fare so well. One lady was a bit over weight and appeared to not be very athletic. She struggled mightily. She got up once for a nanosecond, then quickly fell. That was the high point of her lesson. It was all down hill after that. Mostly her efforts were futile. I felt for her and tried to encourage her as we all did. Did I sort of feel superior, maybe look down on those who had not been as successful as Laurie and me?

Let me review. Where our lesson took place we could look farther out and see big waves, and we could see some terrific surfers shredding those waves. There was a reef farther out where the big waves broke, but then the water would wash over the reef and reform into little waves on the inside where we were. We were surfing little one foot high gentle waves, and we didn’t even have to paddle in to catch them. The surfing instructor stood next to us as we lay on our board and he would push us into the wave so we didn’t have to catch it on our own. What do you think would have happened if I’d gone out to that outside break and tried to catch and surf those big waves? It would have been laughable and humiliating. It certainly would have been futile, and would have irked the good surfers out there because I’d get in their way. I was terrible compared to them. My point is that in the surfing sense I had nothing to be proud of, and I certainly had no reason to look down on anyone else. In truth, ever since then I’ve had empathy for anyone I see trying to surf and see them flailing unsuccessfully. I don’t judge them, I feel compassion for them. I see my surfing prowess for the joke it is. No one was proud in our surfing class, because we had no illusions about our surfing ability, or maybe I should say our lack thereof. So we could all accept and encourage one another and celebrate the little victories each of us had, be they ever so humble.

That’s a bit like what we ought to be like as a community of followers of Jesus. We have been given grace. God is making something beautiful of the mess that we are. So when we see others making a mess, our response should be to empathize, to feel compassion for them.

Think about what a wonderful thing it is to be accepted just as you are, where there is no competition to prove that you are better than someone else, where you don’t have to put up an image or fear a failure, because no one will condemn you or even look down on you if you mess up. That’s what the church of Jesus Christ should be like. When we grasp the Grace of the good news, we can see that we all here are loved by God, accepted by him, valuable in his eyes, not because we are pros at being really good, but because of what Jesus has done for us. So we can relax. In Matthew 11:28 Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” And he meant it. So Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, could all rest. So could Saul, the worst of sinners. And so can we.

Philip Yancey tells the story of a woman who came to him in a wretched condition. She told her story through tears and sobs. He could hardly bear to listen to the sordid tale and had no idea what to say. Finally he asked if she’d thought about going to a church for help. She got a look of pure shock on her face and said, “Church? Why would I ever go there? I already feel terrible about myself. They’d just make me feel worse.” Something is wrong when that’s true.

Many years ago when our kids were young teenagers, our family made the hike to the top of Diamond Head in Honolulu. We were on vacation on Oahu, and after several days of sun and surf we were all feeling a bit crispy. We wanted to do something with a little less sun exposure. We drove into the Diamond Head crater, then started up the trail to the peak. It is not especially long. It’s a little less than a mile, but it is rough, uneven and very steep. Emphasis on steep. The day we hiked it was very hot, and inside the crater there was no breeze. Toward the end there is a long, steep staircase, followed by a 300 foot long tunnel then a vertical staircase. As we were trudging up that trail many people passed us as they were on their way down. I noticed they broke into three classes. The largest class ignored us. They were intent on making their descent and we were irrelevant and unimportant to them. They said nothing to us, just passed by without a word. They kind of had the mind your own business approach.There was a second class of people. They spoke to us as they went by. They said things like, “If you think this is bad, just wait. The stairs up at the end are killers. That is really tough.” There was one other class of folks. They said things like, “I know it’s tough, but you can do it. It’s worth the effort. Keep going, you’ll make it.”

There are people hiking through life all around us, and for most it is a tough slog. Life throws a lot of obstacles, disappointments, hurts and losses at us, and it is natural to get discouraged. If we are honest, we see a lot of falling short in our own lives. Most people are passing by and minding their own business. Some are discouraging. Some highlight our failures and shortcomings. But there are those precious few who say to us, “Keep going. Through God’s grace you can make it. It’s worth the effort, so don’t give up.” After we have been shown the grace that the bad girls of Israel experienced, we should be that kind of people. People who see the struggle of flawed, struggling travelers, and love them like we have been loved, who join them in their struggle, who accept them, care for them and encourage them.

This is what the angels meant when they announced at Jesus’ birth, “peace on earth to people upon whom God’s grace rests.”