

## Finding God in the Screw-Ups Sunday, 11/29/20

How many of you have ever worn a “dunce cap?” You used to see them on the heads of children in classrooms, as late as the 1950’s.<sup>1</sup> This picture looks like it might be the album cover for a band, but wearing a dunce cap used to be a pretty traumatic affair. There are undoubtedly some of you in worship today who had the unfortunate experience of wearing one of these dunce caps in school. If you’re willing to admit it, would you please post about it? Children were made to sit in the corner of the classroom while wearing a dunce cap when they misbehaved or didn’t know an answer they were expected to know. We don’t call children “dunces” anymore, or at least we shouldn’t be, and hopefully were not shaming them in front of their classmates. But there’s a part of the dunce cap legacy that remains in this world, and we have all inherited parts of it. Even if we’re not wearing pointy hats with the letter “D,” we do tend to get branded with labels when we screw-up or fall short of what others expect of us. And everybody screws up, no matter who you are. If you don’t tend to make math errors, then maybe your Achilles Heel is your emotional intelligence. If you don’t tend to screw up your relationships, then perhaps you just can’t seem to get where you need to be on time. All of us are “smart” in some ways, and not so smart in other ways. And no matter how smart we are, no matter how old we are, everybody screws up sometimes. Everybody. Being made in the “image of God” means we have infinite value and great potential, but it doesn’t mean we won’t screw up.

Did you know dunce caps used to mean the exact opposite of what they mean today? The man after whom the hat is named, John Duns Scotus, was a Scottish philosopher who believed that wearing a cone shaped hat somehow worked like a backwards funnel to collect knowledge at the tip of the hat and spread it over the head.<sup>2</sup> (Remember, this was about 800 years ago, and it’s a great illustration of how someone can sincerely believe something and yet be sincerely wrong!) Within a few hundred years of Scotus’s death, his philosophical approach fell out of favor, and his followers, who were known as “duns” came to be seen as intellectually inferior. And that’s how we got the “Duns” cap!

It’s a funny story, but the dunce cap is a sad testimony to the cruelty we can have in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-dunce-cap-wasnt-always-so-stupid>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

demeaning other human beings. Equally sad is that we tend to put our own dunce caps on, constantly devaluing ourselves, exaggerating our failures, and overlooking our strengths as well as God's ability to redeem our errors. As we begin our Advent preparation for Christmas, we begin with a reminder that God has always been present with the screw-ups. In fact, God has shown a remarkable penchant for using the people that others have cast away as champions for God's causes of justice, mercy, and grace. Surprisingly, that's most concisely illustrated at the very beginning of Matthew's Gospel, in the verses we're most tempted to skip over when we read Matthew. Honestly, aren't you usually eager skip the first 17 verses, filled with so many names that are difficult to pronounce and just a little boring to read? We usually skip right to verse 18, the birth of Jesus. But each of those names is there for a purpose, and we stand to gain a lot by taking the time to learn the stories behind them. Let's take a look at just a few of the screw-ups in the family tree of Jesus, beginning with the very first verse in The Message.

**{Read Matthew 1:1-6a, MSG}**

You might remember that Abraham and Sarah were the ones God sent on a journey with the promise that they would be blessed to become a blessing to all people. You might also remember that God's promise to Abraham was and is being fulfilled through Jesus, a descendant of Abraham. What you might not remember are the stumbles that Abraham and Sarah took along the way. At ninety years old, Sarah doubted God's promise that she would bear a child. Abraham had his own trust issues with God. On two separate occasions he let soldiers carry Sarah off after lying to them about her married status for fear that they would kill him if they knew. And yet both Sarah and Abraham were extraordinarily faithful and risk-taking for God, setting out on a trek to a new home with only God's word that they would be blessed. God redeemed their screw ups, and their faith qualified them to be the forebearers of Jesus. Each of them, in their unique ways, helps us to find God in messy circumstances. Is it possible that God could redeem your screw-ups as well?

And then there was Tamar. Tamar is the first woman named in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, the first in a series of unlikely heroines to appear. The fact that these are woman makes them notable enough in an ancient Jewish genealogy. But most of them didn't come from Jewish families either- that is, they were probably gentiles. On top of that, most of

them were involved in some type of sex scandal, although not in the ways you might expect.

Tamar was a Canaanite who married into the family of Judah. When Tamar's husband died without producing a child, Jewish law required that the next brother marry her. After he died as well, Tamar's father-in-law blamed Tamar for their deaths and unjustly decided to keep her away from his third and only remaining son. Tamar was a widow, and without a husband or a son she was completely cut off from an economic future in a land and culture completely dominated by men. So Tamar decided to take things into her own hands by disguising herself as a temple prostitute and lying in wait on the side of the road for her father-in-law, who ultimately got her pregnant with the male heir she so desperately needed.

Quite a story, isn't it? Neither Judah's sin nor Tamar's deceit prevented Tamar from playing a central role in the story of bring salvation to the world. God loves the screw-ups, including each of us.

Let's move on to our next screw-ups in Matthew 1, picking up with verse 6b.

{Read Matthew 1:6b-11, MSG}.

Everyone remembers David, the brave young lad who defended God's honor by facing a giant with a sling shot and went on to unify the 12 tribes into a one kingdom. But do you also remember his scandalous abuse of power, when instead of leading his troops into battle he stayed home at his palace, forced himself on a young woman bathing in a courtyard, and then had her husband murdered so that he could claim her as his wife? Wait, is that really in the Bible? You bet it is. King David, the man described as being "a man after God's own heart," committed rape and murder. That woman, Bathsheba, is obliquely referred to in Matthew as "Uriah's wife," a pointed reminder that David had her husband, Uriah, killed. In David we find yet another flawed human being who made selfish, wrong decisions that brought pain to himself, others, and his relationship with God. And yet, we also see an example of God's redemption, an example of how God makes it possible for us to turn away from sin and return to God- not to escape all the consequences, but to at least return to the path of life. God is the King of redemption, and instead of killing David or separating him from Bathsheba, he redeemed their illicit relationship to produce an heir who would become the next king and forebearer of Jesus, Solomon. Solomon, incidentally, also became caught up in sex scandals, this time involving the worship of foreign gods. But

Solomon is also credited with leaving us much of the wisdom we find in the Old Testament. If a sex-offender and murderer like David could be used by God for good, and a serial idolater like Solomon made into a wise king, what might God make of your own mistakes?

There are so many other examples of God's redemption of the questionable relatives of Jesus: Rahab, the foreign prostitute who had enough faith in God to help the spies hide in Jericho; Ruth, the foreign widow who became Christ's forebearer because of her faith and faithfulness in accompanying her mother-in-law Naomi back to Bethlehem; and of course Mary, an unmarried, pregnant teen who was probably illiterate, but gracefully and obediently accepted an unexplainable pregnancy and the radical intervention by God into her daily life and future. God works in the midst of, and out of love for, lowly, imperfect people like us. Isn't it wonderfully appropriate that the One who was born to save us was preceded by people just like us, none of them perfect, all of them screw-ups in their own way, each of them needing to be saved?

I could spend hours telling you stories of how I've screwed up in life, but that, ironically, would make me a narcissist! But seriously, screw-ups happen- to me, to you, to everybody. Just because you make mistakes in your life doesn't mean you are one. Are there things in your past, or even in your present, that paint a big "L" on your forehead (loser)? Don't let your failures define you. The good news of advent is that Jesus is coming into this world, the perfect Son of God descended from imperfect people like you and me. It's almost impossible to understand how that can be, so don't over think it. Instead, receive the good news with glad hearts. God will always be found among the screw-ups, because God will spare nothing to bind up our broken hearts and set us back on our feet again. It happened over and over again in the Bible. It's happened over and over again in my life. It can happen for you as well, if you'll surrender your life in faith and move forward in obedience, loving God and loving your neighbors more each day.

Please take some time now to reflect on how you will rely on God to redeem your mistakes and shortcomings. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer.



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