"Genealogies, Banana Art, and a Vulnerable God"
Advent 4A (December 22, 2019)
Scriptures: Psalm 80:1-3; Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:17-25
Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Circle us, Lord, during this season of light. Keep the light within, keep the darkness without. Amen.<<

David Datuna is a Smithsonian-recognized artist based in New York City. His art is known around the world for its social consciousness. Until recently - I'll get to that "recently" bit in just a moment - Datuna was best known for his series titled "Viewpoint of Millions." His website describes this series as "a network of positive and negative optical lenses suspended over a large-scale layered, collaged, and painted image." The images beneath the lenses are painted or collected from photos, newspaper articles, and magazine clippings. It's a "mixed media palette," according to his website.[1] Atop the mixed media images are dozens of eyeglass lenses that have been fused together. One gallery described the optical lenses suspended over the images as an "undulated surface of eyewear fused together to create a prismatic surface."[2] Viewers of Datuna's art have to look through the dozens of lenses to see the image beneath - the lenses distort the image, so the viewer has to strain and squint to see through the glasses. The idea behind this art form is for "the prismatic surface [to] both hid[e] and revea[l] the work below … ." And the lenses are meant to symbolize that each of us sees the world differently through our own very personal and sometimes distorted lenses. Under dozens of eyeglass lenses, Datuna's portrait of Vladimir Putin was compiled from miniature images of the Mona Lisa. It sold for $270,000 in Moscow. And his depiction of the flag of Saudi Arabia was presented as a gift to King Salman in an effort "to build cultural bridges between the Muslim and Western worlds." Back in June, Datuna opened an art space in a repurposed taxi garage in Long Island City, Queens. *Social Life* magazine said "the aim [of the gallery] is to showcase the common denominator, our shared humanity, through art."[3] Datuna himself referred to art as being "an integral part of diplomacy" "in an increasingly hostile and divisive world … ." Art," he said, "is free of judgment and is the most fluid form of communication. It empowers people to share ideas without prejudice, embrace the differences, and find common ground despite them."[4]

Datuna's technique of embedding ornate images beneath dozens of fused-together eyeglass lenses is not the only thing he's known for. He has used Google Glass in his art - it's the first piece of art to use a technology that can look back at you: you look at the art and the art looks back through Google glass; he's used blocks of dry ice to lament climate change by arranging the blocks to spell the names of politicians; and he's planning the largest art exhibit ever to incorporate artificial intelligence, which will be on display during the World Cup in 2022. Datuna is known for being provocative. But two weeks ago he also became known for his performance art using a banana in a Miami gallery. The banana was part of an exhibit by artist Maurizio Cattelan. Cattelan affixed a banana bought in a Miami grocery store to a gallery wall with duct tape. It was meant to symbolize global trade. But when David Datuna discovered that the asking price for the banana on the wall was $150,000 he decided to act in dramatic fashion. Visiting the gallery, Datuna added his own artistic creativity to the exhibit.

[1] https://datuna.com/media/photos/1
[2] https://www.gclementgallery.com/david-datuna-1
[3] https://sociallifemagazine.com/2019/06/25/datuna-art-space/
[4] https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/american-artist-david-datuna-recreates-the-flag-of-saudi-arabia-300571333.html

It was performance art. Datuna removed the $150,000 banana from the wall in the Miami gallery, and he ate it. "I call the performance, 'Hungry Artist,'" he said, "because I was hungry and I just ate it."[5] Onlookers were appalled, snapping photos of the incident with their phones, and then posting them all over social media. The police were called in, but so far Datuna has not faced charges. Apparently he alerted his lawyer in advance that he might get himself into trouble for eating the banana. Like most of his art - whether looking at images through eyeglasses or using Google Glass or writing the names of politicians with dry ice - the point of "Hungry Artist" was to be provocative. After eating the banana, Datuna said in an interview that millions of people are starving in the world, and there's something obscene about duct-taping a $.20 banana to a wall and selling it for six figures.[6] So, he ate it before the check could be written.

You have heard me say it before in sermons, but I believe one of the best analogies to biblical stories is found in the provocative world of art. The Bible is literary art. Art that stretches the limits of human language to speak of that great mystery we call God - to audaciously strain to speak of what "cannot be said," as theologian Peter Rollins describes God-talk.[7] It's what ancient Jewish and Christian theologians call "apophatic" theology - negative theology - theology that can only speak of what God is *not* not what God *is*, because as soon as we try to say what God is our language disintegrates. So, everything we say - everything biblical writers say - must turn to analogies, or to symbols, or to artistic expression - to provocative literary art.

Which is how I would describe today's gospel reading on this fourth Sunday of Advent. Matthew the gospel writer is being provocative when he writes about the genealogy and birth of Jesus. Matthew's gospel opens with a genealogy that begins with Abraham and ends with Jesus, and in between includes obscure names like "Hezron" and "Salathiel" and "Eliud" alongside more familiar names like "Isaac" and "Jacob" and "Ruth" and "David" and "Solomon," and, of course, "Joseph the husband of Mary." "Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob," begins the genealogy; or, in the King James translation, "Abraham begat Isaac, and Isaac begat Jacob," and on and on the many "begats" go. I spared today's scripture reader from having to read all those names, and began today's reading with Mathew's punch line: "All the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations." Matthew wants readers to see perfect symmetry in the genealogy. It's a work of art by Matthew the literary artist.

A work of art, because it's certainly not a work of history. If we jumped over to glance at Luke's gospel and its genealogy of Jesus, we would find some different names listed. Matthew and Luke list different names for Jesus' grandfather, for example.[8] And if we counted every "begat" in Matthew's genealogy, we wouldn't find 14 and 14 and 14 generations, but 13 and 14 and 13 generations, each block of generations separated by different scales of time: the first block of generations is 750 years, the second is 400 years, and the third is nearly 600 years. Even counting each generation as spanning 40 years, none

5 https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/david-datuna-banana-art-basel-trnd/index.html?utm_medium=social&utm_term=link&utm_content=2019-12-10T05%3A40%3A33&utm_source=twCNN

6 https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/dec/11/david-datuna-120000-banana-interview-art-basel-miami

7 Peter Rollins, *How (Not) To Speak of God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2017 [2006]), 34.

8 See Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), ch. 4.

of them adds up to 14. Matthew is painting symbols not history. The point he's making is a theological one - that God moves in history and in our lives in subtle ways - ways that are sometimes only detectable in hindsight - even when it comes to the birth of Christ and counting his ancestors. God moves through what Jewish theologian Michael Fishbane calls "the thickness of human existence."[9] The messiness of human affairs. The begats and the births, through natural processes and rarely through miracles. After all, if miracles happened all the time they would cease being miraculous and would become natural. No, God moves through and responds to the natural world, a bit like the Force in *Star Wars*. Sensitive and subtle, understated and gentle, always driven by love. God *is* love, says the New Testament; and "love does not insist on its own way," as St. Paul once described it. It's not in love's nature to be tyrannical or selfish or to concoct schemes and create tragedies that try our faith. Rather, it's in love's nature to be vulnerable.

In his book *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, theologian William Placher writes about the difference between the God known in popular culture and the God of the New Testament gospels.[10] God in popular culture, he writes, the God most people think of when they say the word "God," is a God of power. An all-powerful king in charge of everything, who rules as an absolute monarch. A domineering father figure. It's the image of God that Sigmund Freud derided in his book *The Future of an Illusion* when he described this God as the product of human psychological need - a "childhood … need for protection" by an all-powerful father figure, said Freud.[11] But God in the New Testament gospels is different, says Placher. This God "is, first of all, love … ." And "love involves a willingness to put oneself at risk … ." God is "vulnerable in love," he says. Vulnerable to the hazards of birth in the ancient world. Vulnerable to the vicissitudes of growing up as a peasant in poverty. "Willing to be vulnerable to pain" as part of the human condition.[12] The "very God of very God," as the ancient creed puts it, was vulnerable to the extent of becoming a victim: born into poverty, a refugee from the start, nowhere to lay his head as an adult, called a "glutton and a drunkard" for eating, drinking, and being merry along the way, and then ending this life "hanging on a cross,"[13] so that God could experience the totality of human existence: its joys and sorrows, its laughter and suffering. Its vulnerability. "Full participation in the human condition," writes scholar Jack Miles, "requires a beginning in the leveling anonymity of infancy."[14]

Which brings us back to Matthew's story of Christ's genealogy and birth. Buried in Matthew's list of "begats" are the names of four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and "the wife of Uriah" - her name was Bathsheba. Luke's version of the genealogy doesn't include these four names. Like David Datuna, Matthew, the literary artist, is being provocative. All four women were notorious in the Old Testament: Tamar pretended to be a prostitute; Rahab was a prostitute; Ruth was a Moabite (Moab was ancient Israel's bitter enemy); and Bathsheba gave birth to Solomon after King David had her husband murdered. And at least three of the four women - Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth - were gentiles not Israelites. Provocative Matthew lists these women to set the stage for Christ's birth and life - a birth to a teenage mother, a life

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[9] Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 33.

[10] William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), xiii.

[11] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion: Religion is the Universal Neurosis*; trans. J. A. Underwood and Shaun Whiteside (New York: Penguin, 2008 [1940]), 36.

[12] Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, 3.

[13] Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, xv.

[14] Jack Miles, *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 86.

lived to showcase God's love for all people: the gentiles and the prostitutes, the tax collectors and the sinners, the victimized, the vulnerable, the wanderers, the lost, the doubters, the debtors, the prodigals, those who are too comfortable in their privilege - *all* people: you and me. And God does love us. More than we can even imagine. God can't help Godself *but* to love; love is what God is - it's the one statement about God that even apophatic theology recognizes. "I have loved you," says God through the prophet Jeremiah, "with an everlasting love."

Let me close today with a story told by Donna Schaper, Senior Minister of Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan. In the apophatic tradition - the negative theology tradition of saying what God is *not* - Schaper begins by saying that God is not like Alexa.[15] You know Alexa, she says, Amazon's virtual assistant who can govern most home affairs from turning on the heat to turning on music to making to-do lists to recounting weather forecasts and news headlines. God is not like Alexa. "[Alexa] is a disembodied voice," writes Schaper, "and she does everything you tell her to do. My grandkids love her. 'Alexa, hide my brother's shoes.' 'Alexa, get me a cookie.' Alexa can't do all these things but if she could, she would. That's why they love her." Schaper continues: "My British friends first introduced me to Alexa when I was staying with them. Perhaps it was their English accents that made the mornings so humorous - or that we could just lie in bed until the tea kettle whistled. 'Alexa, turn on the water under the tea kettle.' I was not amused by her behavior when I stayed in someone's rented house. No one on the rental site mentioned that the teenage kids had told Alexa to lock all the doors and not reopen them even if some stranger had the code. They kept switching the code from afar to dis-amuse their parents, who were apoplectic that Alexa had gone rogue on them. What is so funny about a robot?," asks Schaper. "[A robot] is as far from the divine as you can get. The divine doesn't ever do exactly what you tell her to do. The divine doesn't play tricks on people or even on parents. … God is fundamentally … a self-directed something or someone who likes to connect with us by choice, not on command."

… A "something or someone who likes to connect with us by choice." Those words have stuck with me during this season of Advent. The birth of love incarnate, which we celebrate each Christmas, is the product of God's choice. A choice made freely. A choice to become vulnerable. A choice to experience the totality of our human condition, so that when we suffer, when we're in pain, when we enjoy life's joys and endure life's trials, we can know - a knowledge borne in faith - that we are loved by divine love; we are accepted just as we are, our beautiful, messy selves - and we can then live in such a way that everyone we meet will know that *they* have met someone who loves them. "The kind of God in whom one believes," writes theologian William Placher, "has implications for the kind of life one tries to live."[16] Amen.

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[15] https://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_disguises?utm_campaign=dd_oct30_19&utm_medium=email&utm_source=unitedchurchofchrist

[16] Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, xvi.