

“Life and Light”: Love and Heartache
Advent 3
Text: Exodus 1; Matthew 1-2 [selected]
12-17-17



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“Prior to the reading today, had you ever heard of ‘Shiphrah and Puah’? Why do you think that Moses preserved their names for posterity?”

“Why do you think that the Advent stories seem to so often highlight the marginalized and the vulnerable? Who are the vulnerable in your world? Can you share a story about a time when you spoke out for someone who was voiceless or advocated for someone who had no leverage?”

“Do you have a story of a courageous woman in your life?” If you feel it appropriate, perhaps you could share it with the group.

“For what have you sacrificed in your life? How have those sacrifices brought clarity to you?”

“What do you think it means when we say, ‘Love leaves me no other choice?’ Are there no other choices available?”

“Can you identify a space or relationship in your life that seems to be inviting a courageous act of love on your part? How might your courage foster the hope of love in another? Does it call for a decisive, ‘No’, or a merciful, ‘Yes’?”

Teaching Notes...

Matthew begins his biography of Jesus in a way that is often lost on the modern reader. We are asked to wade through this mind-numbing list of family members whose names are hard to pronounce and are mostly irrelevant. We don’t see the point.

My lineage reads (moving backwards): “Lawrence begat Philip and Stephen. Sam begat Lawrence and the (12)...” From there, it gets pretty cloudy. As I’ve said before, my family never seemed inclined to invest in a lot of research. I assumed that there were just some things we would rather not know.

Matthew's point, in particular, was to trace Jesus back to Abraham, through David (Jeremiah 23:5-6; Psalm 132:11; Romans 1:3) and, in so doing, connects Jesus to the Jewish story, as well as their hopes for a new King. A rescuer. A "messiah". The continuity between Jesus' life and their story was not coincidental, but satisfying... the fulfillment/climax of a storyline that had been in waiting.

Matthew also seems to frame his birth story in such a way as to present Jesus as the new Moses.

- ~ Pharaoh killed all the male Hebrew babies, but Moses was saved. Herod killed all the male babies, in order to get to "the one", but Jesus escaped.
- ~ Moses fled from Egypt, but later returned. Jesus fled to Egypt and later returned to Israel.
- ~ Moses went up the mountain to receive the Law. Jesus offered the New Law/Covenant at the Sermon on the Mount.
- ~ In the first Exodus, Moses leads the Israelites out of bondage/slavery and into the land of promise. In a new way, Jesus will lead people out of the slavery of sin and death and toward the new life that he has made available for them.

Right in the middle of all the pageantry and the angelic, "*peace on earth*" announcements, we are 'body-slammed' back into reality.

As a child, I remember hearing about "*the flight into Egypt*", but it was presented more like a family road trip than the desperate escape efforts of some Jewish refugees. Apparently, this did not make for the best flannel-graph lesson.

It reminds us that the Advent hopes to which we cling are contested by everything that elevates our anxiety and promotes fear. Our desire for peace is muted by all that is chaotic and dysfunctional.

To live in the Advent story is to live in a world of power, and money, and sex. People use money to get power. Powerful people often exploit others for sex. Sex is used to acquire money and power. To live in the Advent story is to live in defiance of the misuse of power, money, and sex.

To live in the Advent story is to live in love.

When it comes to love, the dictionary is the most detrimental place to begin. Wikipedia proves even more problematic, because it is offered to us as the outcome of an individual's experience. Webster's defines "**love**" as, '*benevolent concern for the another; a warm attachment; holding one's opponent scoreless in tennis*'. Not the stuff of great poetry.

The clear thrust of the Advent offerings is that, **God is love, and we are the be-loved of God.** I think we really are, in a sense, who loves us. That expression has formed our identity and understanding of love, which characterizes the love we extend to others.

"I love you": the most life-altering, life-sustaining words when spoken from someone who consistently demonstrates a rugged commitment to be "with" and "for" us, but some of the most confusing and soul-crushing words when they are offered in the context of misuse/abuse.

We've concluded that love doesn't work. We're cynical. So, our responses become 'measured'; we portion out love to those we believe will hold it well for us. We assume 'guarded postures' like someone protecting a fragile piece of art, or a broken rib. In the process, we never

really abandon the pursuit of love, we just re-define our expectations. Even worse, we settle for a cheap substitute.

Women show up so frequently in the *Advent story* because they are already of, “humble estate”. They are already objectified and marginalized. I find the timing of the season ironic, in light of all the recent accusations of sexual misconduct and abuse. Women finding the courage to say, “no”, to unethical men.

Shiphrah and **Puah**: two women who have gained little notoriety historically, but who now have their own FB page. They are **midwives**. They *attend to mystery; serve beginnings*.

It is widely accepted that Moses wrote the book of Exodus, so it's little wonder why he preserved their names!

Curiously, the story begins, not with the thundering presence on the mountain, or God inscribing his precepts with his own finger on the tablets of stone, but amidst the vocation of (2) obscure, yet faithful women who were committed to God and to serving the people who were most vulnerable and most at risk. Shiphrah and Puah facilitate the salvation operation that God had set in motion.

“We have happy memories of the godly, but the name of a wicked person rots away” (Proverbs 10:7).

The story's authors all agree that it's not love if it can't trace its source back to God, and it's not love unless it is a love that is...

... **'unprovoked' and 'pre-meditated'**. The kind of love that you are after by trying to appear smart, and skilled, and savvy, pales in comparison to the love that names you, places you, and secures you, in spite of all of those things. Remember: whatever you are currently doing to secure that love, you must maintain. You must keep that pace, in order to be your “personal best”.

... **trustworthy because it has met with resistance and hasn't failed (1 Corinthians 13)**.

... **transformative: the character of the lover transforms the “beloved”**.

... **sacrificial. It is designed specifically for the other's sake.**

In a world that is so fickle and ambiguous, there's something incredibly noteworthy about a sacrificial life.

Eventually, sentiment and romance will give way to the *“demands of love”*, and we will be called upon to choose.

Sacrificial moments offer incredible clarity. They narrow our options and gives direction to our passions.

Love will, at some intersection of our lives, demand an irrational demonstration of **courage**. We won't feel safe, but we will feel alive! Paradoxically, when you die, you live, and become the source of life to others for having made such a courageous choice, in the midst of fear.

Know that if you choose to live in love, you will not only have the fullest experience of life, but the most vulnerable and susceptible.

In some, Advent way, the future we desire becomes available to us only as we act lovingly--justly, in the present moment.

We never get the luxury of absolute clarity. When you know what you should do, what you need is not confirmation, but courage. That's why it's faith. That's why it's sacrificial because of the personal cost and its potential impact on the other.

Advent says...

God dreams of justice.

Justice is the outcome of loving the right things.

We'll never experience justice apart from mercy.

Love forms us into communities of people where we see each other, notice each other, care for each other, which demands mercy. Mercy makes allowances (not excuses or space) for all the ways we fail to love each other well (James 2:12-13).

This pattern of "*Down/Up*", "*Loss/Gain*", "*Last/First*", "*Death/Life*", is emblazoned on the pages of the Jewish story. Augustine called it the, "*Paschal (Passover) Mystery*".

The prophets all advise us that this messiah will be no stranger to pain and the sufferings of the human soul. If we can step into the mystery, we realize that we are healed at the deepest levels of our pain by allowing that demonstration to define love.

It's not simply about some "atoning transaction", where God takes all his anger out on Jesus, and we become the gleeful recipients of forgiveness. Jesus takes the worst thing that evil can do to him and redeems it; he turns it in and around on itself to be the very means/mode of salvation. **Jesus "takes away the sin of the world", not by eliminating it, but by robbing it of its power over us.**

He is defenseless and, at the same time, the victor. On the cross, he is no longer victimized, because he forgives. And, the formerly-dead-Jesus invites us to perpetuate such a life: the way of self-denial; the way of death, to find in him life.

Whatever happens to Jesus must happen, in some fashion, to us: surrender, forgiveness, death, resurrection.