



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Redeemed from the Muck” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

December 8, 2019; Second Sunday of Advent

Reading: Genesis 38:11-19; Joshua 2:1-8 and 15

This week I was travelling with a friend to a clergy gathering and we got talking about Advent. When I told him how we’re exploring Jesus’ genealogy, especially the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, he responded “Well, Merry Christmas, Richmond Hill.” He had a point. There’s an expectation about the tone of services leading to Christmas, even though if we were following the lectionary, today we’d hear John the Baptist calling us a “brood of vipers”.

We focus on Christmas as a sweet story about a birth and cut the muck out of it. Yet when we ponder the why of Jesus’ birth, muck is front and centre. He’s born into it to redeem us from it. Redemption is how we translate a word for the money paid for a slave’s freedom. As Christians we assume that happens through Jesus’ death, but as Jewish philosopher Martin Buber rightly says, “We can be redeemed only to the extent that we see ourselves.” Jesus spends his ministry helping people see the oppressive muck they’re in and reaching out a hand to free them from it.

We see some of that oppressive muck in the stories of Jesus’ female ancestors. Consider Tamar. She married Judah’s eldest son, Er who died before they had children. His brother Onan was to marry her and raise children in Er’s name. Because he refused, he too died, leaving Shelagh, the youngest brother. But rather than look after Tamar, Judah sent her back to her family, and left her there even when Shelagh became old enough to marry her. The part we heard is shocking but getting pregnant is the only way Tamar can force Judah to take her back into the family. Women were invisible except through the men in their lives, a reality pointed to in her veiling her face. Hers was a world where men used women, and one could argue little’s changed. She took the only action she could, using what the men wanted from her against them. It breaks my heart she had to do this, but well done turning the tables. In next week’s stories sexuality is prominent too. Naomi tells her daughter-in-law to trick Boaz to think he had sex with her. Bathsheba’s story is more complicated. Over history, she’s been viewed as a victim, King David taking advantage of his authority to have sex with her, or a temptress knowing full well he could see her bathing. The first interpretation removes agency from her; the second is victim shaming. While it is critical to affirm her agency, I tend to blame David. We can’t forget the patriarchal reality of her world.

In all the stories the women did what they could to live in a world intentionally structured against them. While strides have been made in recent decades, we have a long way to go to end gender based oppression let alone reach sexual equality. You’d hope that the day Marc Lépine killed fourteen women at École Polytechnique just for being women was a turning point, an awakening when we started to really see the ongoing violence against women, but as noted in an article in *Broadview*

about the Montreal Massacre, “half of all Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16; every six days, a woman is killed by her intimate partner;... and at least one in four women attending university or college will be sexually assaulted by the time they graduate.” Those statistics are chilling. But as also noted in the article, “Sexism and abuse... is more contested and challenged by women and by men.” Perhaps there was an awakening but the redemption that comes with self-awareness takes time.

It takes time because the equality we yearn for is more than an end to violence but an authentic honouring of both genders and all possibilities along a male-female spectrum. Violence may end, but we won't have equality until we value each other. And we don't as long as women earn less than men, are overlooked for career advancement, viewed as the parent but dad is “babysitting”, continue to do more of the housework, the list goes on. And those are issues facing cis gender women. Trans women and people who identify as non-binary face additional barriers and biases.

Given my relationship status, I asked my friend for insight into opposite gender relationships. He named ways he and his spouse respond differently in terms of what he called “emotional labour”. Pondering Glen and me, I pushed back: “By your definition, I’m the one who puts ‘emotional labour’ into relationships. That just sounds like the way we’ve been raised.” He conceded, noting the challenge is that we teach boys to be strong, in control, powerful. And want girls to acquiesce to that. Thus we perpetuate the muck. Instead we can teach all children to be strong, to be tender, to be independent, to cooperate, to express empathy, to stand up for oneself, and for others.

As we talked. I realized what Jesus shows us. We think of G-d as all powerful. Thus we cast the divine into the image we want for ourselves. As I shared last week, we’re addicted to power and use violence to keep it. It’s what the Montreal Massacre was about. Marc Lépine saw power as something limited. Women gaining access to what he saw as his right meant losing it. But we celebrate the opposite at Christmas, G-d revealed not as almighty but all vulnerable, letting go of “power” as we define it, dominance or “power over”, in favour of collaboration or “power with”.

This is the wisdom we see in the story of Rahab. Rather than see the Israelites as enemies, she helps them. I wonder if she saw beyond ‘us and them’ because she was likely a cultic prostitute. Historically we’ve judged this religious practice but that says more about our view of sexuality. It comes from the belief that sexuality is a way to commune with the divine. It sees G-d through the lens of unity not separation, and so images the divine not by what we want but by what we’re called to be. This points us to Mary who accepts the invitation of Gabriel to bear the Christ child to the world. Through her ‘yes’ we experience in Jesus a union with the divine that all are invited into, all genders. And in her words to her cousin, she reminds us that we are invited into the same unity with each other – not to be in conflict or competition, but in mutual relationship, abiding in love and care. I pray we will live into this, able to see our muck and finally be freed from it. Amen.