

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

December 23, 2018 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

A Child of Shame, A Child of Grace

Matthew 1:18-25

Joshua was about to knock on the door of his friend Ben's house, when he heard the yelling from inside. His hand stopped in mid-air as he heard the half-sobbing, half-furious voice of Ben's mother Ruth. "You ruined my life," she was yelling. "If it hadn't been for you, my life would be so different, so much better. I was so happy until I had you. The day you were born was the worst day of my life!" Her voice was growing louder and more shrill and Joshua knew that in a moment she would hit Ben. Joshua knew it had happened before. So he knocked, loudly, and then opened the door. Ben was curled up in a corner, tears streaming down his face, his arms up to shield his head. His mother standing over him with a raised hand, but her face turned toward the door, and when she saw Joshua, the anger evaporated, replaced by embarrassment and shame, and she sank to the floor.

"I came to see if Ben could come out to play," Joshua said. A relieved Ben half-crawled and half-ran out the door and Joshua followed. They played together for the rest of the day, and Joshua kept noticing things that he had taken for granted before, the way Ben couldn't meet his eyes, the lack of self-confidence, the anger just below the surface that flared at the smallest thing.

That night, Joshua told his father about what happened. His mother and father had known Ruth from when they were children. Joseph sighed and put his arm around his son and hugged him close and spoke in a sad voice. "Ruth was engaged to be married when she found out that she was pregnant. Her fiancé broke the engagement when he heard about it, and eventually married someone else. She was left to raise her son without a father. And now she blames Ben for ruining her life. Of course it is not Ben's fault, but it must be very, very hard for him, being told that he is to blame. He must carry around shame like a lead weight in his heart." Joseph paused and then, in a soft voice, almost as if he were speaking to himself, said "It could have been that way for us, too."

Joshua was surprised. “What do you mean ‘It could have been us’?” Joseph thought for a long time, and then told Joshua the story of his birth. He had heard pieces of it before, but never Joseph’s side before. Joseph told him how he had heard about Mary’s pregnancy, how he had considered abandoning Mary just the way that Ben’s father had abandoned Ruth, and how in a dream, he had been told that the child in Mary’s belly was from the Holy Spirit. “When I awoke,” Joseph continued, “I realized that the dream was a message from God. I realized that I was looking at it all wrong. I realized that it wasn’t Mary’s virtue or my honour that was important. It wasn’t our plans, or our respectability that was important. It was you that was important. And that you, however you were conceived, were a gift from a generous God. If I had not had that dream, if I had not realized in time, I might have made a terrible mistake. And you might have had to live with the shame of my mistake.”

Joshua thought for a long moment about his friend, and how it might have been for him. “I wonder,” he finally said, “if Ben feels that he is a mistake?”

Joseph responded with the quiet determination that Joshua had learned meant something important was going to be said, “We named you Joshua, which means ‘Saviour,’ because in my dream I was told that you would save us from the lie that anybody is a mistake. I was told that you, my son, would be God’s vehicle for teaching us that we are all gifts of grace.”

That night, Joshua made his way through the dark streets of Nazareth to the house of his friend Ben. The two walked the streets of Nazareth and the hills of Galilee for a long time that night, talking about the story that Joseph had told Joshua. And at the end of it, Joshua realized that he had learned something that he needed to remember for the rest of his life. He had learned that he could heal with a story.