

From the Pastor's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, December 18, 2022 - Advent 4

To get into our sermon today, I want to first introduce two stories – one, a high-art social satire novella from the 19th century, and the other, a Hallmark Christmas movie. This is an absurd proposition with which to begin a sermon, so I hope you pay attention if for no other reason to see how mightily I can fail in this attempt. Ready?

Sometime in the eighth or ninth grade, I had to read *Flatland*, an 1884 novella by Edwin Abbott Abbott. That's his name. Abbott twice. His parents hated him. Clearly. To understand *Flatland*, you have to know something about geometry, which – in retrospect – makes me believe that my English and Math teachers were in cahoots with one another. I feel manipulated.

“Flatland” is a two-dimensional world inhabited by women, who are lines, and men, who are polygons with various numbers of sides. It was 19th century, Victorian England. Even their social satires were still going to be a little sexist. Naturally, in this world, the greater number of sides the men have, the more powerful they are. We follow the protagonist – “Square,” which represents a genteel middle-class polygon – into a dream where he enters “Lineland,” which is a one-dimensional world where all the men are lines and all the women are points. Again, it was 19th century, Victorian England so even the dream worlds within their social satires are sexist. I'm sorry. Square, however, is not a square in “Lineland” because squares inherently exist in two dimensions and Lineland is a one-dimensional world. All the residents of Lineland can only see him as a set of points on a line. Square tries to convince the monarch of Lineland about the existence of this second dimension, but fails. Ultimately, the monarch tries to kill him rather than suffer his unintelligible ramblings. At this point in my preaching, I hope you're not identifying with the monarch of Lineland.

After this dream, Square has a vision where he is visited by Sphere. Naturally, because Sphere exists, by definition, in a three-dimensional world, Square can only see Sphere as a circle. All of the sudden, Square's previous troubles of explaining two dimensions in a one-dimensional world are now his troubles in understanding a third dimension as

he resides in a two-dimensional world. Sphere fails to explain it in terms that Square can understand, so Sphere transports Square to “Spaceland,” the three-dimensional world Sphere lives in. From this heightened perspective, Square can see the tyranny and folly of Flatland, his two-dimensional home. What Square discovers is that in every land – one, two, or three-dimensional – the residents of those lands can only understand their own experiences. Those who attempt to proselytize otherwise – to evangelize a different status quo – are imprisoned or killed because, well, this is a social satire about the violence we all do to those who are different.

Okay, hold onto that story as we pivot to a Hallmark Christmas movie that I convinced Brianne we should watch ironically. A couple of weeks ago we watched *The Most Colorful Time of the Year*, which features a tragically widowed young mother, who is an optometrist, as she falls in love with her daughter's middle school science teacher, who is color blind. It's okay to laugh here. You should be laughing here. I am not a routine purveyor of Hallmark Christmas movies. I blame NPR's Linda Holmes for writing too compelling of an essay on them for piquing my interest. I love Linda Holmes, but I do not love what she put me through.

It's too low of hanging fruit for me to pick on this movie. The jokes would all be cliches and, likely, just me punching down. What did, truly, capture my interest, though, is what it means that these films exist at all. What sort of cultural anthropology is revealed when we view these films as cultural artifacts? Because, to be clear, the content executive at Hallmark recently revealed in an interview that each of these films cost about \$2 million to make and they made 27 of them this year. That's \$54 million! And, also to be clear, Hallmark is *not* a non-profit. They make these films – they spent \$54 million – because they believe there is *more than* \$54 million in profit to be captured. These are not insignificant cultural artifacts. We only belittle them, I've come to believe, because we're afraid of what they are going to tell us about ourselves.

And here's what *The Most Colorful Time of the Year* – again, it's OK to laugh – tells us about

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ourselves: Women are not listened to in our society – and their greatest fantasy is that they just might be listened to in the end. I come to this conclusion not just because our optometrist protagonist struggles to get hunky science teacher to, first, even admit that he's color blind and, second, to receive some basic treatment by wearing specific glasses, but also because every second of this film revolves around whether she is or isn't being listened to. Her daughter, for instance, is a near-perfect child who is routinely seen voluntarily doing her homework and cleaning her room – a fantasy for a mother of any early-teen child. Her assistant at her optometry practice does as she's told and looks grateful for it – a fantasy for any small business owner's relationship with their staff. Honestly, the more I watched this film, the sadder I got because I kept thinking about the millions of viewers – almost all of them women – who were finding some satisfaction in this film, and those like it. The fantasies played out in it reveal a social flaw in our real world. *The Most Colorful Time of the Year* is also a social satire, but purely by accident. [pause]

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent and we've lit the Love candle. I want to contend that this Love is a reality-reorienting, "new normal"-creating work of God's reconciliation of the world. Advent, after all, is where we come to learn how to wait on Jesus' Second Advent. It is where the gifts of the world to come – the peace, hope, joy, and love – are bestowed upon us in anticipation of this world. And we light those candles to keep the reality – the veracity – of this faith assertion burning bright in our midst. And of all the gifts we're given, Love is supreme. It is Love that is best at both revealing God's work in the world and guiding us as we partner with God in this work. This Love is big. This Love is powerful. If we have even a little humility in our souls, we will understand ourselves to pale in comparison to this Love. We will understand the existence of this Love as a perpetual challenge to grow and expand in it, newly and afresh day-by-day. At the very least, we should be cautioned by our two scripture readings today about what it looks like when we content ourselves with less Love than God is doling out.

In our passage from Isaiah, we find Isaiah encountering King Ahaz. Ahaz was not a good king in Judah. He sacrificed his children to the foreign god, Molech. Not just "children," but *his* children. In God's patient love, God attempts to cajole Ahaz into trusting God. God does this thing that is never done, He becomes Genie from *Aladdin*. This is probably the only time that you can imagine God sounding like Robin Williams. Take advantage of it. And I say this because God basically says, "Make any request of me you want. I don't care how high or how low. I just want you to trust me." Ahaz, however, doesn't want to trust God. Ahaz is content in his infanticide status quo. But in order to not say the quiet parts out loud, he strikes this faux-pious posture and responds with "Far be it from me to test the Lord my God." This man murders children and somehow delusionally thinks he isn't *already* testing the Lord his God! Isaiah names it as much by saying that Ahaz is wearying God.

Ahaz is the monarch of Lineland. His status quo can suffer no intrusion, no nuance, no expansion. I'm sure Ahaz has some sense of love. Everyone does. Even evil people. Everyone has some notion of what it is to love and be loved. Of course, not every sense of love *is* love. The phrase "hurt people hurt people" is accurate precisely because we are capable of learning abusive behaviors under the guise of love, and we will perpetuate those behaviors until such time as our understanding of love can be expanded. The challenge, then, is to figure out what character traits we need to inhabit if we are to be open to an ever-expanding love; to a love that exceeds our one, two, and even three-dimensional experiences of it. To both receive and then be able to share a divine, holy love that seemingly comes from dimensions outside our perceptions.

This is the hard lesson that Joseph must learn too via angelic visitation. There's a lot to be said about Joseph – my buddy Jake is preaching an entire sermon on him today and I've left myself about 700 words. We can't get into everything about Joseph. I'm not even sure scripture wants us to get into Joseph all that much. After all, only Matthew makes mention of him. What I do want to highlight though is that we can presume a

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reasonable enough chronology from the two gospels that even have a nativity story – Matthew and Luke – and that chronology goes like this: Mary is visited by an angel that reveals that she is carrying the Messiah. She shares this news with Joseph at some point (is it before visiting her relative Elizabeth or after? Who knows? It doesn't really matter). Joseph, clearly, doesn't believe Mary. I suppose that's understandable enough. His fiancée shows up pregnant and claiming to be carrying the Son of God. That's too crazy for even Maury Povich to put on his show. Jerry Springer? Well, maybe.

Whatever the case, we know that Mary has fully submitted to God's plan – you know, the one that will reconcile the entire world into an eternity of *shalom* – but Joseph hatches his own. That is such a dude thing to do.

Now, the text goes to great pains to make sure we understand that Joseph is a righteous man, but his sense of "righteous" is but a flat square in a three-dimensional world. A square in a two-dimensional world might be righteous enough, but it falls a little flat in a three-dimensional world. Falls a little flat. See what I did there? At any rate, Joseph's plan is to work within his concept or framework of righteousness. Mary's testimony does not sway him. Mary is the proto-protagonist in every Hallmark Christmas movie – just another woman fantasizing about someone listening to her.

I'm going to confess, I'm probably a little jaded toward Joseph. I don't think his righteous, virtuous, abandon-the-pregnant-teenager plan is all that merciful. Or, at the very least, it isn't a mercy that costs him much. Men in his time could present their wives with a bill of divorce for just about any reason. And then that was it. Maybe they'd gain a bit of a reputation after a while of doing this, but my hunch is that the gestational period for Joseph's repaired reputation was going to be shorter than Mary's gestation of Jesus. But here's the twist: I think we're all supposed to be a little jaded toward Joseph. I believe that his story is told as a microcosm or a metonym of the *greater* story of God's ever-expanding, multi-dimensional, reality-reorienting Love at work in the world. We are, in other words, beneficiaries of a Love that Joseph was not. Our standards *should* be higher than his. Our

behaviors *should* outpace his own. If anything, his are the shoulders we stand on as we strive to be even more loving than we previously thought.

In this way, I think Joseph's story is a sort of cultural artifact that we are to read precisely for what it can and should reveal in us. Whereas the Hallmark Christmas movie just reveals, apparently, an entire society worth of women who feel under-appreciated, under-trusted, so too should our squinty-eyed, suspicious review of Joseph's plan reveal to us that the power of God's Love has already begun to overwhelm us in comparison to him. And for this we must be grateful.

But we cannot stop at mere gratitude. The only thing that keeps us from turning into Joseph ourselves is a conviction that God is perpetually finding a way to say "yes" to everyone. My second-favorite theologian, Karl Barth, says that Jesus is God's "Yes" to humanity. In the incarnation of Christ, we hear God say "Yes, you are mine. Yes, you are loved. Yes." Joseph's initial struggle results from his assumption that Mary's pregnancy could not possibly be God's Yes to the world. And, again, if he had only heard of it second-hand, this might be reasonable on his part, but since we have to assume she's made explanation – indeed, we have to assume he would *want*, even if in just his anger, to hear her try to explain this pregnancy – then his is a failure of imagination. Joseph is Square, trying to understand Sphere, but only seeing a circle.

The challenge before us this day, then, is to not limit the metrics of God's love. They go as deep as Sheol and as high as the heavens. They expand from one dimension into the next into the next and likely even into the ones we don't experience. God's Love pushes us to find the limits of it – a task that we will never complete, but which we will enjoy immensely if only we keep our own stunted expectations of this Love at bay. For the beauty of this Love is precisely that there's always more of it to discover, to receive, to embody, and to give. The hope in the Hallmark Christmas movie – maybe it's only redemptive value, but one that is in line with the movement of God in our world – is that we do witness characters going from being a mere dot to a line, or from a line to a polygon, or from a polygon to a cube. I'm still, to be clear, not going to watch

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any more of these. They still depress me as social commentaries, but at least they have a moment of expansive love. And lest our lives become *less* than a Hallmark Christmas movie, we too should pursue such expansive love.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.