

## ROYALTY AND MANGER DUST

Luke 2:1-7

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Fourth Sunday in Advent, Festival Sunday, December 18, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### SCRIPTURE

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

I have never been as consistent in reading scripture devotionally as I have been in studying it to prepare for preaching and teaching. Though I have lived with it so long I have inherited its worldview and noticed that some of its phrases and characters come to me in the ordinary course of life, but rarely have I picked the Bible up from the coffee table or bedside and read it as part of a devotion.

But this Advent my wife Maggie and I decided to have a devotional every night before we go to bed. We sit on the living room sofa. We light an Advent candle. Starting with Genesis 1, we read aloud a chapter of the Bible each night. From the King James Version no less. We sing a verse or two of a hymn, depending on how off key either or both of us are. And we say a prayer.

After three days, I looked it up and found that there are 1,189 chapters in the Bible, so if we keep this up, it will take us three and a half years to read the entire book. But so far, it is proving to be meaningful.

On night seven, we were reading from the Flood Story in the seventh chapter of Genesis. God instructs Noah and his family to enter the Ark. God instructs Noah to take seven pairs – male and female – of all animals that are ritually clean and two pairs of all unclean animals. God includes in this list of creatures “*fowls also of the air by sevens, the male and the female*, but this time God gives Noah a specific reason for his instruction:

*...to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth.<sup>1</sup>*

This phrase – *to keep seed alive on the face of all the earth* – jarred both of us with its specificity, its cadence, and its phraseology so foreign to our own.

It seems that in the midst of the most destructive action that occurs in the first eleven chapters of the Bible, destruction which without comment the Bible places within God’s mind and purview, God still plants *a seed of hope* for a future:

*...to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth.*

Alive *not just* for Noah and his family; alive *not just* for those who a few chapters later will become – through the call of Abraham and Sarah – God’s own people Israel, but “*...alive upon the face of all the earth.*”

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 7:3 KJV.

## II.

I need not recite *public* events over the last several years that leave many of us feeling like our world may be clinging for dear life to the side of the Ark, and I can only scratch the surface of the *private* events that leave some of us feeling battered by floodwaters when we arise in the morning and lie down hoping to sleep.

But even as the story of the Flood raises theological questions in *our* minds about *the mind of God*, the second half of this verse jumped out at us as if it were a stranger knocking at the door, speaking a similar but almost different language, bringing a plateful of promise and hope and setting it down on the coffee table in front of us, its fragrance filling our living room like a Danish fresh from the oven:

*...to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth.*

This one half-verse tells me that even in those moments of our personal lives or periods in history that are threatened with irreparable damage and destruction, there lies a *seed* of hope, a *seed* of promise, a *seed* of the future.

*...to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth.*

## III.

While this may be the first time the *seed of life* appears onstage in Scripture, it returns for repeat performances throughout the Biblical narrative:

- It glints off Jacob's ladder.<sup>2</sup>
- It blossoms in Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers: "I am Joseph your brother; is my father still alive?"<sup>3</sup>
- It hangs from Rahab's window wrapped around the crimson cord that protects Rahab and her family from Joshua's invading troops.<sup>4</sup>

*The seed of life...*

- ...rises like dew from Gideon's fleece.<sup>5</sup>
- It lands gently in our ears through the melodies of David's harp.<sup>6</sup>
- It stirs us with Ruth's loyalty to Naomi: "Where you go, I will go; your people shall be my people; your God, my God."<sup>7</sup>
- It ennobles Esther to fight tyranny and genocide.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 28:10-17.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 45:4-6.

<sup>4</sup> Joshua 2:1-24; 6:22-25.

<sup>5</sup> Judges 6:36-40.

<sup>6</sup> I Samuel 16:14-23.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth 1:15-18.

<sup>8</sup> Esther, specifically Chapter 8.

- It sprouts from Job’s determined affirmation in the midst of suffering: “I know that my redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth... then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.”<sup>9</sup>
- It joins in the call of the aging preacher in Ecclesiastes: “Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come...”<sup>10</sup>

*The seed of life...*

- ...rises with Jeremiah’s affirmation that bursts forth from his chapters of lament: “Great is Thy faithfulness.”<sup>11</sup>
- It proclaims with the lover in the Song of Songs: “...the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.”<sup>12</sup>
- And *the seed of life* “walks...through the valley of the shadow of death,” comforting us with “rod and staff.”<sup>13</sup>

*...to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth...*

#### IV.

The most consequential form of the seed of life is the birth of Jesus Christ, as Messiah, Son of God, Redeemer and Savior of the world. Recall its circumstances:

- A required government census
- People returning to the towns of their origin or residence to be counted
- A young, economically marginal couple – expecting a child – journeying 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be counted
- While they are there, the time comes for her to deliver
- There is no place for them to stay
- She gives birth in a stall outside an inn in which there is no room for them, despite their plight
- She wraps her infant in “swaddling clothes” and “lays him” in the trough from which the animals feed.

She has been told her child is “the Son of the Most High.” She has been told that the Lord God will give her child “the throne of his ancestor David.” She has been told that her Son will “reign over the house of Jacob

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<sup>9</sup> Job 19:25-26 NRSV.

<sup>10</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:1.

<sup>11</sup> Lamentations 3:23 KJV.

<sup>12</sup> Song of Solomon 2:11-12 NRSV.

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 23:4 KJV.

forever” and that “of his kingdom there will be no end.” Yet when she delivers her holy child, he has no place to lay his head. So, she places him in the dust and dirt of the manger.<sup>14</sup>

Her child is “Royalty in Manger Dust.” Yet it is he who “*keeps seed alive upon the face of all the earth.*” He *exceeds* but does not *replace* all other seeds of hope.

## V.

Last week, my 47-year-old son Martin returned to his home in Florida with his wife Emily, whose wedding I attended in March and who are now expecting a child. They had made an eight-day trek by car from their small apartment in Southwest Florida, which is provided to them at nominal rent by a church in which they are active. They drove over 1400 miles to the place of Martin’s birth in West Texas to introduce Emily to his mother, and then to East Texas to see Martin’s biological father who is in the final stages of Alzheimer’s.

The difficult journey was a milestone. For the first time since he was fourteen, Martin has been sober for 23 months. During COVID, alcohol poisoning brought him within a few days of death, until a friend found him and was finally able to persuade him to leave his apartment and go into rehab for the fourth time in two years. Somehow, this time, *the seed of life* in the midst of death got Martin’s attention; and he began in earnest to climb out of the Pit – like that into which Joseph’s brothers had thrown him – in which he had spent most of his life.

Along the way he met Emily, who had travelled a similar path. Over 200 people were at their wedding, nearly all members of the recovering community and storefront congregation which is their family. The wedding occurred in a beautiful old home restored by a member of that community and provided them for the occasion. As I wandered among its guests, I concluded I was probably the only person present who didn’t sport a tattoo and who doesn’t smoke, more a reflection of my age than their character. The event was beautiful, yet the home was on the waterfront in Ft. Myers, Florida, where they live; like much else in the city, Hurricane Ian destroyed it a few months ago.

Martin works as a carpenter’s assistant. I rarely ask how they pay for what little they have. They asked for a laptop for Christmas, which we bought them this week, so he can look for a higher-paying job with which to support his wife and their expected daughter.

Even in the worst years of Martin’s near deadly addiction, he has always managed to see a “seed of hope.” Before they left for their trip, he said to me: “I’m giving up a week’s wages to go, but at least gas is down to \$3 a gallon; so much better than \$5.” They are back home now, and when their daughter is born a bit after Easter, in whatever of the world’s “manger dust” she is placed, she will be royalty to them.

*...to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth.*

Amen.

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<sup>14</sup> Luke 1:26-38.