

“Silent Night” ~ Judges 19

20TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

October 22, 2017

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Judges 19

Prayer for Illumination:

Living Word, speak to us of your presence as we listen for your wisdom and truth. Gather all that is within us, broken and whole, to be touched by your Spirit, held in your love, and called by your grace. Amen.

Judges 19

This sermon begins with a reading from Judges 19 – and since this is a graphic passage of sexual violence, I wanted to alert anyone who had tuned in on the radio broadcast to be aware of that. In this passage, we will hear of a woman called a “concubine” – which describes a woman who was a possession of a man in addition to a wife, but who had no social standing in or protection from society. And although the woman had no choice in this, there was a stereotype of immorality and promiscuity associated with a concubine. And here in Judges 19 with this concubine, a terrible story unfolds:

19In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite, residing in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. ²But his concubine became angry with him, and she went away from him to her father’s house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there some four months. ³Then her husband set out after her, to speak tenderly to her and bring her back. He had with him his servant and a couple of donkeys. When he reached her father’s house, the girl’s father saw him and came with joy to meet him, and he remained with him three days. ⁹Then the man departed, and arrived opposite Jebus (that is, Jerusalem). He had with him a couple of saddled donkeys, and his concubine and servant were with him. The servant said to his master, “Come now, let us turn aside to this city of the Jebusites, and spend the night in it.” ¹²But his master said to him, “We will not turn aside into a city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel; but we will continue on to Gibeah.” ¹⁴So they passed on and went their way; and the sun went down on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin. ¹⁵They

turned aside there - he went in and sat down in the open square of the city, but no one took them in to spend the night.

¹⁶Then at evening there was an old man coming from his work in the field.

¹⁷When the old man looked up and saw the wayfarer in the open square of the city, he said, "Where are you going and where do you come from?" ¹⁸He answered him, "We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I come. Nobody has offered to take me in. ²⁰The old man said, "Peace be to you. I will care for all your wants; only do not spend the night in the square."²¹So he brought him into his house; they washed their feet, and ate and drank.

²²While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house, and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him." ²³And the master of the house went out to them and said to them, "No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. ²⁴Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. Ravish them and do whatever you want to them; but against this man do not do such a vile thing." ²⁵But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine, and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. ²⁶As morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light. ²⁷In the morning her master got up, opened the doors of the house, and when he went out to go on his way, there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, with her hands on the threshold. ²⁸"Get up," he said to her, "we are going." But there was no answer. Then he put her on the donkey; and the man set out for his home. ²⁹When he had entered his house, he took a knife, and grasping his concubine he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. ³⁰Then he commanded the men whom he sent, saying, "Thus shall you say to all the Israelites, 'Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out.'"

It is difficult; it is painful; it is uncomfortable – to hear such a story: a woman whose life is only as a possession of, for the use of, men – a woman who is a commodity, a sexual object, for men; a woman who is betrayed, raped, abandoned, whose life is taken by, body desecrated by, men. But what story am I speaking of? – about Judges 19 back then? – certainly. And about today too – about women in our world, our community, our families. There is no distance between the world of Judges 19 and the stories of women today – no gulf between that world and ours. It is difficult; it is painful; it is uncomfortable - and perhaps ‘uncomfortable’ is more of the mix than we care to admit.

How can we even approach, find a way into, such a story then? and such stories now? We are faced with a character given no name, who is voiceless, powerless – who has no control. We see the woman spoken of only as a concubine: her name is not given; her voice is never heard; she has no power to protect herself. But there is another character like that in this story too: God’s name is never mentioned; God’s voice is never heard; no power from God to stop the horror that unfolds. Is God present in this story at all? – well if God is, then the character who God is most like in this story is this concubine woman: no name – no voice – no power.

We have before us terrible stories in this text and in our world. We have in this text characters given no name, no voice, no power. What can we do with...this? I wonder, do we need to try to redeem it? – is that the point, that there must be some redeeming value to pull out of this? – isn’t that the point of a sermon, of faith? But I want to say “NO” to redeeming this story in that way today - “NO” – because there is no redeeming value here: there is no way to fix this story right.

But – there is something persistent, insistent in me that does not want to give up on redemption – something persistent and insistent that I pray is God’s Spirit that wants to believe that such stories then and now compel us to wrestle with words like ‘redeem’ and ‘redemption’; compel us to wrestle for something from our faith which can speak, must speak to this story; compel us to wrestle with our world, with ourselves, with our God. So if you would trust me to try, and you will try with me, then we need to listen to this story, in this story, for a different kind of redemption.

In Judges 19 there is far too much to horrify us – but just for now I want to notice with you some particular details about the story. I wonder if you noticed that the story is connected to Bethlehem? – we’re told that is where the concubine is from. Along with that, it’s clear in the story that that as a concubine this woman was on the margins of society. And perhaps then did you notice too, that this woman traveled on a donkey? - and did you note that the travelers had a hard time finding a place to stay? That’s all there in Judges 19. And when we notice those things, I wonder, then, if you hear echoes also of another story? – a story also connected to Bethlehem; a story of a woman also on the margins, who as a single pregnant woman faced the danger of being ostracized from society, even of being killed; the story of a woman traveling on a donkey, and of travelers having difficulty finding room in an inn...– do you know a story like that, in Luke 2? And before you think I am stretching way too far here to make such a connection, or wonder why I would even want to connect those 2 stories at all – please hear me out. Because if we can simply say that there ARE two such stories both connected to Bethlehem – then there’s something I want us to consider: which is that whichever story you may choose, it happens within a framework of redemption that we’re often told the Bible is about – telling us that the main issue to be dealt with is that sin is lurking and that God’s judgment needs to do something about it.

And what I want us to see, is that when we put Scripture stories in such a redemption framework, then some very twisted views of life can appear within it. For Judges 19, this framework of sin and judgment has had the insidious effect of leading some Christian commentators to conclude that since this woman was a concubine, then she must have been sexually loose, which means that ‘really she had this coming to her anyways’ – and even that her suffering and death was actually an execution of divine justice. This framework has outrageously led some commentators to conclude that even if this concubine’s death was unfortunate, it was at least better than avoiding a “more serious sin of homosexuality”. Such judgments of and hierarchies of sin are the sorts of things God is portrayed as keeping track of. And what about the other Bethlehem story? – well, for all the lovely Christmas sentiments that we are familiar with, in such a redemption framework of sin and judgment, that Bethlehem story is about the requirement of Jesus coming to earth to die in order to satisfy God’s punishment for our sins. That’s a story we’ve all been told before - told that accepting that story is the main thing that matters in life and eternity.

That’s the redemption framework often given to those stories, back then. But I wonder if it’s possible that such a framework impacts how stories are told in our world now? Well how about this: Have you ever heard it said that a woman who was abused or raped actually “had it coming to her”? - I have. Have you ever heard about a woman involved in prostitution or trafficking that perhaps she bears some of the blame? – ‘I mean, couldn’t she have made an effort to run away?’ – I have. Have you ever heard it expressed that men are more important than women? – I have. Have you ever heard that women should be less defensive about sexual harassment from men, because, you know, “boys will be boys!”? – I have (and if you have paid any attention at all this week on social media to #metoo, then you realize

just how many, how most, women have heard this – have faced sexual violence - too.)

Have you heard of the church focusing on sexual sins: often targeting women; often demonizing certain expressions of sexual orientation and identity - have you heard of that? - I have. Have you ever even heard of the church being more focused on whether people are saved or not, then whether people are safe or not? – I have. Now I am not saying that this all connects in a straight line, but I do believe that it becomes clear that the frameworks we use have an impact on how we tell stories in our world today; and that the framework often given for redemption very much has an impact on what people of faith pay attention to in our world today.

So we have to ask this question: is our faith about an accounting with God for the bad things people do? Because if that is so, then let's be clear - then such faith has nothing to say about or for or to this woman from Judges 19; then God really has nothing to do with her story other than to judge her like all the rest – then we are proclaiming her final, ultimate abandonment. But what if the story of Bethlehem is about something very different: the story of a God who enters into this world in the silent places – in the silence of a victim, the silence of the unnamed, the silence of the unknown – what if that is at the heart of both Bethlehem stories? What if redemption is that God sees those who are forgotten? – that God aches and hurts and cares about those who are violated? – what if redemption is God reclaiming humanity for those who are dehumanized? What if redemption is the silent God speaking a name to those whose names have been taken from them – the name: Child, Mine, Beloved.

Can you see that in both of the stories of Bethlehem, that such redemption is possible? – if you can, well, then perhaps your eyes are better than mine. I know I'm telling you it's there – but I am not saying it is easy to see, or that it makes it all right, or that it sets things all straight – it's not that kind of redemption, remember? It is horrible, the silence of the woman, and of God; it is horrible, loudness of violence, of diminishment and death – it is horrible then and now. But what I am saying is that we do have choices about what we listen to in this world - and I know that I want to hear the voice of my God in this world – perhaps you do to. And what I am seeing, trusting, is that the God of redemption, the God of Bethlehem, is pointing us where to listen: to the stories of the nameless, to the voices of the voiceless, to the suffering, the violated, in our world; what I am believing is that God's Spirit is calling us to be about a redemption which is stubborn, persistent, insistent, in bringing to light the darkness of this world, and in bringing light to that darkness; believing that the God of Bethlehem is present to give a value to, a voice to, those who are ignored and diminished by the powers of this world. And in that naming, valuing, voicing, I trust that there is and will be the mystery of God's redemption at work – God's voice of life: as a concubine and single pregnant woman then, and a woman who suffers sexual violence or who is dehumanized now, are all named by God: precious, beloved, mothers of faith – these women, all who face such violence, embodying the true power of dignity and humanity.

With the terrible stories then and now, how is God is calling you to listen this day? – to listen to your own value and power if you have been diminished?; to repent if you have perpetuated violence, and turn from power over to power with and for?: to listen to the pain around you –giving voice to the silenced, hidden, forgotten?; to listen to your own calling to bring the darkness to light and light to the darkness? The stories of Bethlehem compel us to speak of and speak to the brokenness of this world - to break the silence of the night.

It is difficult. It is painful. It is uncomfortable. It is the way of redemption. Amen.