



“The Shadow”

Psalm 91: 1-2, 9-16; Luke 4: 1-13

Rev. Jody Andrade

February 14, 2016

Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church

Dave, I know I’m still a “new minister”—but I looked and looked and could NOT find Valentine’s Day in the Bible. Is it Old Testament or New Testament?

Dave: Jody, it’s in the Old Testament in the book of “Hallmark.”

Well, shoot, since I couldn’t find it, I went ahead and wrote a sermon without it. It actually was not too terribly difficult to find stories of love in the Bible. There is the very first match of Adam and Eve, living in loving bliss in the Garden of Eden. There is David’s love for Bathsheba, though I’m not 100% sure that what David felt for Bathsheba should be called “love.” Abraham and Sarah were loyal to each other for many, many years, at least until they decided they had to procreate and Hagar became part of the mix. Lazarus was loved by his sisters before he died and after he rose from the grave. There is even evidence of love between the rich man and his money, though again, I’m not sure that would be called “love.”

When it comes to love—deep, abiding, unending, unqualified love—there isn’t one specific book in the Bible. The entire Bible is a love story. It’s the story of a Creator making the world out of love, out of a desire for relationship, and then continuing to love that world regardless of how many times those of us in that world turn our backs on our Creator.

And what about the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the books that tell about Jesus’ life? If they were brand new releases at Barnes and Noble, they’d be in the “how to” area of the store. You’ve heard of the books “Computers for Dummies” and “Auto Repair for Dummies” and even “Wine for Dummies?” The gospels could be marketed today under the name “Love for Dummies.” Jesus’ entire life, all he said and did, was a guide about how to love. The message of the Old Testament, that we are God’s and loved and chosen by God, is made flesh in the New Testament in the person of Jesus.

Our modern culture is hooked on stories of love to the rescue. Often (especially if Disney is involved) there is a princess who is looking for love and a prince that comes and rescues her. (Thank heaven that Frozen finally got us out of that prince-rescues-princess rut!) Ariel and Snow White and Jasmine all had a prince to love them. Rapunzel was stuck in a tower until she was

rescued by love. Julia Roberts in the movie *Pretty Woman* was trapped by “circumstances” and needed her prince Edward to sweep her away from it all.

Sometimes we Christians fancy ourselves as Rapunzel. The Bible tells story after story of rescue from the “powers of evil.” God rescues the Israelites from Pharaoh. God rescues Lot from Sodom and Gomorrah. Some may even say that God “rescues us from sin” by accepting the death of Jesus as a substitute sacrifice.

But what if the Bible isn’t in fact filled with rescue stories, but instead filled with love stories? What if Jesus on the cross isn’t a story of rescue but a story of redemption and reconciliation? There is a huge difference. Rescue includes drama, tension, an antagonist, and a protagonist. Rescue means that a person is in peril and needs help to survive. Rescue is a key element in drama. Redemption and reconciliation are quite simply about love.

Maybe the Bible would be pretty boring without rescue stories. Lot is offered an opportunity to live under God’s love. Well, that’s boring. How about he flees from the “evil” of the city and his wife turns into a pillar of salt? That’s drama. Adam and Eve live in bliss in the Garden of Eden, awash in God’s love. Well, that’s boring too. How about Eve talks to a snake, she and Adam eat from a forbidden apple, and they are cast out of the Garden of Eden forever? (And she gets labor pains to boot!) That’s drama. Lot, Adam, and Eve all continue to be loved by God, but that isn’t the part of the story we remember.

Over and over, God offers this agape love, this all-encompassing love, this unconditional love. God’s “boring” love equals security, equals no drama. God’s love is Eden before the snake. In Psalm 91 we are invited to rest, to take shelter in God’s shadow. We are invited to have our feet on firm ground, to celebrate our safety in the shadow of the Most High. We are allowed to say to God, “My refuge and my fortress; my God in whom I trust.” We are created to interact with one another dripping in agape love.

But it’s hard not to enjoy a good soap opera, isn’t it? Don’t we thrive on a little drama?

In the Luke passage, also known as “the temptation of Christ” we heard the devil tempting Jesus to place his security in things other than the shelter of God. You can have power! You can be popular! Invite a little drama into your life!

Jennie, you are a Christian invited to take refuge in God’s shadow. You’re asked to shelter safely in the shadow of the Most High. You’re about to be ordained! Are you ever tempted to live in a shadow that clearly doesn’t belong to God?

Jennie: When it’s not God, the shadow I hide in is distraction. Rather than dealing with a situation, emotion, or relationship, I try and push it out of my head with anything I can—music, TV, books, work, projects, other people’s problems, just about anything will do, as long as I don’t have empty time. By eliminating any silence, I numb myself to reality, seeking shadows of

noisy distraction, and hope that it will just go away. But it turns out, I can't always prevent the silence. I forget my headphones on my morning walk with the dog, or I finish a project and suddenly have a gap. It's in those moments when that still, small voice of God creeps in again, and I must answer, "I need you."

Dave, you've been a minister for more than 40 years. Does Jennie's description sound at all familiar to you?

Dave: Yes, I shelter myself in staying busy, constantly busy, frantically busy. This provides the illusion that I am affecting the source of my anxiety, that ultimately I am in control if only I will shape up and get the job done. I prefer to be exhausted than to feel helpless. It's much easier to dance with frenzy around a golden calf than to sit quietly before God.

The wrong refuge isn't always loud and busy. Sometimes we turn aside from God and hide in the shadow of isolation. Does that sound familiar to anyone?

Andy: When I feel anxious or depressed, I hide in the shadow of isolation. I want to climb into bed and pull the covers over my head and cut myself off from the world. Or I "zone out" and hide deep within the shadows of myself. I become so consumed by depressed thoughts and feelings about my own doubts and insecurities and the brokenness of the world that I refuse to engage the living God. I also fail to see and hear the people who are present around me. And yet if I breathe deeply and focus on hearing God's call of me to move one step forward, I slowly but surely move from deep darkness into the comforting shadow cast by God's light.

If you've tuned into any of the political debates, you've heard the candidates methodically erecting another shelter, the dramatic shelter of political strength, under which they say we all should hide. Candidates in both parties are using fear to scare us. There is a lot of "they" language in politics—again, on both sides. Language like "they are taking away our freedom" or "they are destroying our core values." Sheltering in the shadow of God means you don't have to build up fear and accuse others; you don't need to build up walls and demonize. There is no general vague "they" when you are sheltered in God's shadow.

Yes, there is evil in this world, but playing on the fears of voters and demonizing large groups of people are just accusations to make the story dramatic. Remember, the Bible says that GOD created us. All of us. There is ample room in God's shadow.

Hear this: this message is not a call to be passive players in this world. Being under the shelter of the Most High is not an invitation to lie down and do nothing. Close your eyes and imagine a "slanderer" or "accuser." Imagining a slanderer or accuser is easier than believing you'll soon run into a man in a red suit carrying a pitchfork. The Greek translation of διάβολος, devil, is also "the slanderer, accuser." We hear slander and accusations every day: on the news, at the watercooler, at the playground, in one of those mean spirited forwarded emails you discover in

your inbox. In Luke, διάβολος offers Jesus the shelter of power and prestige-- and Jesus responds clearly. He quotes scripture: "Worship the Lord your God and seek only him."

What if the next time you receive one of those mean spirited "us/them" forwarded emails you paused, read it slowly listening for slander and accusation, and reminded yourself you are resting safely in God's shadow? What if you moved beyond the drama and you actually wrote back to the sender? Perhaps not directly quoting scripture but with a response grounded in love? Asking the sender, "Who are 'they' that you fear so much? Do you know any one of them?" Asking why the sender is so frightened when they too are under God's protection?

Verses 11-13 from Psalm 91 say that God will command angels to guard you. In ancient times, these verses were written and worn in a necklace, an amulet, around a person's neck to protect them.¹ It sounds a bit superstitious, like hocus-pocus magic, doesn't it? That magical amulet works in a world where the devil is wearing a red suit and carrying a pitchfork. But does that make sense today? How much more effective would it be to memorize those verses, just as Jesus had done, so that in the face of temptation you could say clearly, "Worship the Lord your God and seek only him."

During Lent we are challenged to give up something to God. Perhaps we could consider giving up the drama. Move from the shelter of distraction and busyness into the shadow of God's love. Move from the shadow of isolation and be embraced in the shadow of the Most High. Turn away from the slander and accusation and respond from the shadow and security of agape love. Hear the good news! God's got you. God is sheltering you. Abide in God's shadow. Be whole. Be all that you are created to be. Be love.

Amen.

¹ Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol 2, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p 32.