

Reel Theology #2 “Precious”
A sermon preached at Eglinton St. George’s United Church
by Deborah Hart
February 7, 2010

Readings: Susanna: 1-64 from *The Apocrypha* (see end of sermon for full text of *Susanna*); Mark 9: 33-37

Prayer: May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and redeemer.

Choosing a movie for this year was a difficult task. Don and I split up the various suggestions you gave us or that we heard about in the media, and I went to see 6 of them. *It’s Complicated*, *An Education*, *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus*, and *Did You Hear About the Morgans* had various degrees of potential. Then there was *Avatar* (**put on 3D glasses!**) that won best picture for the Golden Globes. Part of it was beautiful with a profound message about creation but the other half with war and destruction left my heart racing after 3 hours.

Precious was the other movie I saw. At first I didn’t choose it either because I thought you might find it too much of a leap from Harlem to North Toronto. But the more I thought about it, the more I wanted to tackle violence against women and children, prevalent around the world. *Precious* is a story about Claireece Precious Jones (played brilliantly by a relatively unknown Gabby Sidibe), and is a 16-year-old illiterate overweight African-American teenager, who as one reviewer observes, “has up until now been invisible: invisible to the father who rapes her and the mother who batters her and to the authorities who dismiss her as just one more of Harlem’s casualties.” The movie is based on the book *Push* written by Sapphire, an author and poet who lived in Harlem from 1983 to 1993 and taught reading and writing to teenagers and adults.

At 16 Precious is pregnant for the second time by her father. Her first child was born when she was only 12. “The system” has failed Precious; but her mother, Mary Johnston, (played by Mo’Nique) knows how to manipulate it to get as much child support and welfare as possible, claiming she is raising Precious as well as her child, when really the grandmother is looking after the baby. Whenever the social worker pays a visit, she feigns politeness and caring. Mo’Nique is so convincing that one feels both horror and pity at the sight of this chain-smoking couch potato. This “mother Mary” left me cold and angry. She is physically and emotionally abusive, treating her daughter, if you’ll pardon the expression, “like shit”. Both the novel and movie are full of vulgarities, but none of that compares to the unimaginably demeaning words and actions of the mother.

Luckily for us, the presence of the father is felt more than seen in the movie, except in the flashbacks for Precious of whenever he would venture into her bedroom, but then she would dissociate and head into a dream world, so one is spared the graphic images of incest. I was surprised as I thought back through the movie, that the father is never

actually there. But he might as well be because the trauma he leaves his partner and daughter to deal with is very evident and overwhelming.

This movie is about the pervasiveness of violence against women but it is also about very strong women, from Precious herself to the social worker played by Mariah Carey. Then there is the amazing teacher at the Alternative School, Ms. Rain, who sees the potential in Precious and the other students, and through journaling and discussions, draws out the best in these young women, despite their awful beginnings. She also helps Precious get to a halfway house with her new baby boy, Abdul. Precious quotes a story about such a house, saying that it got its name because it is “halfway between the life you had and the life you want to have.”

From a young woman who sat at the back of the class and never said a word, Ms. Rain painfully and hopefully coaxes out the real Precious, and she eventually receives the Mayor’s Literacy Award. One of the nurses who was on duty when the first child was born, sees Precious with a second child, and looks upon her with disdain, saying she had hoped she would have learned from her mistakes. Precious thinks: *“I didn’t make no mistake unless it being born, ‘n Miz Rain say I was born for a purpose.... I don’ know what purpose but I know I got a purpose, a reason, and according to Farrakhan I got a almighty ...god. Mistake? I don’t think so. Mistakes for niggers to rape. I think I might be the solution.”* Gradually she rises above the horrible abuse and demeaning brainwashing that made her feel stupid and worthless, to believe in herself and her future -- her own and that of her children. Hope dawns and one is amazed at the power of the human spirit to rise above such adversity.

I said at the beginning of the sermon that I wasn’t sure you would make the leap from Harlem to North Toronto. You see, incest, violence against women and children, physical, sexual and emotional abuse know no bounds of race, religion, nationality, age or economics, social status or education. They are all here in our community as well as in every community around the world. Just ask anyone who is a doctor, nurse, social worker, therapist, teacher, psychiatrist, jail keeper or minister. Just ask family members about the family secrets, and soon you will uncover tales of woe and tales of victory.

In 2006 the first ever in-depth global study on violence against children was conducted by the United Nations’ Secretary-General. In that study the World Health Organization estimated that 150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 years of age experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence during 2002. The Convention on the Rights of the Child offers this basic assumption: “The family is the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members – and particularly children - thereby recognizing that the family has the greatest potential to protect children and provide for their physical and emotional safety.... Eliminating and responding to violence against children is perhaps most challenging in the context of the family, considered by most as the most “private” of private spheres. However, children’s rights to life, survival, development, dignity and physical integrity do not stop at the door of the family home, nor do States’ obligations to ensure these rights for children.... No violence

against children is justifiable. Children should never receive less protection than adults. All violence against children is preventable.”

The 2006 Stats Canada figures tell us that 58,486 women and 36,840 children sought refuge in one of 473 shelters across our country in 2004. And that only reflects the ones who dared to leave their homes and abusive relationships. It names violence against women as a serious issue in Canada with half (51%) of Canadian women having experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16. They also report that **every minute of every day, a Canadian woman or child is being sexually assaulted**. Most abuse is by men and by someone known to them. Children and youth make up 61% of reported sexual assault cases in Canada. Physical and sexual abuse costs Canada \$4 billion each year, factoring into account social services, criminal justice, lost employment days and health care interventions. The cost of operating shelters in Canada totals more than \$135 million each year.

Abuse is often about power imbalances – economic, social, religious and governmental power, and of men over women. Some mothers may commit violence against their children as Mary does in the movie. Mary blames the child for “stealing” her man, even though Precious was only 3 when the incest began. She feels rejected for a younger woman, and all alone and unloved. She becomes pathetically self-centred and caught in a vicious cycle, blaming everyone else and taking no responsibility herself. Mary is both victim and perpetrator.

It was early on in my ministry in the 1980s when a young woman in her 20s came to me one day and asked what I thought about pre-marital sex. Her parents were well-respected members of my congregation and I thought this must be a test! I avoided the question and asked why she wanted to know. What gradually emerged was a story of abuse. As she desired intimacy with a serious boyfriend, she started having flashbacks of incest. It was ongoing but until now she had managed to compartmentalize it somewhere deep in her psyche so that she could function each day. But now the flashbacks were happening more frequently and immobilizing her. She would curl up in the fetal position when we met as she tried to find the adult words to give voice to a childhood experience.

Additionally her mother over the years would play abusive games as the daughter would come home and find a favourite stuffed toy slashed or dismembered, hot water would “accidentally” get spilled on her, and it was made known that she was the least favourite of the children in the family. It took tremendous work with a therapist plus my support and eventually the boyfriend who became her husband to see her through to a somewhat healthy state, such that she was able to give birth to her own children and learn to love them.

Most of us don’t want to uncover these stories in our neighbourhood, our church or our family and so we turn a blind eye or don’t ask. It is often a silent crime assumed to be something private, but it affects our whole society with its social, relational and fiscal costs. Many of us want to throw up our hands and say we can’t do anything to change the circumstances.

I don't want to judge or blame today. I want both victims and abusers to get help and break the chains of violence. And I do want to say that we can and should make a difference, especially as people of faith. From 1988 to 1998 I served on the Canadian committee for the World Council of Churches' Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women. I heard stories of horror as well as courage and triumph. I heard of groups and organizations challenging the status quo, government and church institutions to work for change. During that time a submission was made by the Canadian Churches to the government's Canadian Panel on Violence against Women. It was signed by 11 different denominations and Councils.

The submission owns the fact that churches and theology have been part of the problem in the past. It affirms that "life is a gift from God, and that women and men are created equally in God's image, with inherent worth and dignity." It goes on to state that: "As Christians, we recognize the need to ensure that the victims of abuse know that their suffering is neither trivialized nor ignored by church and society. We also recognize an obligation to help abusers take responsibility for their actions and to be truly converted from such action. We hope, work and pray for a society in which mutuality, justice, gentleness and peace can be enjoyed by all and where no one need be afraid."

I chose the story of Susanna from a part of scripture that we Protestants rarely read. In one sense it shows that little has changed: Men of influence and stature are believed over women, even when the men are corrupt and the women are upstanding, and when both belong to the same local faith community! But still I love this story because justice prevails; and it prevails because one young man dares to stand up for this woman and take on the elder male judges in the community. It's a bit unfortunate that Daniel, instead of Susanna, ends up being the one praised at the end (!), but at least it is because he is a spokesperson for God in answer to Susanna's prayer and faithfulness.

Men need to challenge the behaviours and attitudes of other men. A year or two after the Montreal Massacre in 1989, that has led to our December 6th Day of Remembrance and Action against Violence against Women, several men in Canada got together and decided they didn't want to stand idly by. And so, with only six weeks of preparation, 100,000 men across Canada were mobilized to wear white ribbons as a symbol of their opposition. Since then that White Ribbon Campaign has spread to 57 countries around the world with a focus on educating men and boys, speaking out against violence and raising public awareness, working in partnerships with women's organizations, the public sector, media and others. They take this pledge: "*I pledge never to commit, condone or remain silent about violence against women and girls.*" Each man who signs that pledge and wears a ribbon from November 25th to December 6th each year is making a difference.

Ms. Rain, the teacher in the movie, almost single-handedly makes a difference in the life of Precious and the other girls in the alternative school. One person can make a difference. Under her guiding hand, Precious takes a journey that leads her from darkness, pain and powerlessness to light, love and self-determination. The Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children in our city says the best

way to help a young woman is first of all to let her know that you believe her if she discloses abuse to you. Secondly to let her know that she is not alone and that many women have survived violence. Thirdly to help her access some of the community services available. Fourthly, to keep her confidence. And finally support all efforts to change conditions in our society that condone violence against girls and women. Donate your time, resources or money to a local women's organization that provides services and advocacy, lobby politicians for change, and refuse to tolerate violence whenever and wherever you witness it.

Every child is a child of God and every child is welcome and "precious" in God's sight. As people of faith, let's act as if we truly believe this until all God's children are safe and loved. Amen.

Intro to Susanna verses 1-64

The biblical story of Susanna is often attached to the book of Daniel or it is part of the Bible referred to as "The Apocrypha" which means "things that are hidden". The Apocrypha refers to approximately fifteen books or portions of books that were included in the Greek and Old Latin versions of the Old Testament, but were not in the Hebrew canon, the list of recognized authoritative books. Protestants have generally followed the Hebrew canon and if included these books are placed in a separate section between the Old and New Testaments. They are not seen as authoritative when it comes to doctrine but may contain words of wisdom. The Susanna story might be considered a "moralistic novel" and an ancient example of a "detective story". As you listen to the story, keep in mind that it was written well over 2,000 year ago.

Susanna 1-64

There was a man living in Babylon whose name was Joakim. He married the daughter of Hilkiyah, named Susanna, a very beautiful woman and one who feared the Lord. Her parents were righteous, and had trained their daughter according to the law of Moses. Joakim was very rich, and had a fine garden adjoining his house; the Jews used to come to him because he was the most honoured of them all.

That year two elders from the people were appointed as judges. Concerning them the Lord had said: 'Wickedness came forth from Babylon, from elders who were judges, who were supposed to govern the people.' These men were frequently at Joakim's house, and all who had a case to be tried came to them there.

When the people left at noon, Susanna would go into her husband's garden to walk. Every day the two elders used to see her, going in and walking about, and they began to lust for her. They suppressed their consciences and turned away their eyes from looking to Heaven or remembering their duty to administer justice. Both were overwhelmed with passion for her, but they did not tell each other of their distress, for they were ashamed to disclose their lustful desire to seduce her. Day after day they watched eagerly to see her.

One day they said to each other, 'Let us go home, for it is time for lunch.' So they both left and parted from each other. But turning back, they met again; and when each pressed the other for the reason, they confessed their lust. Then together they arranged for a time when they could find her alone.

Once, while they were watching for an opportune day, she went in as before with only two maids, and wished to bathe in the garden, for it was a hot day. No one was there

except the two elders, who had hidden themselves and were watching her. She said to her maids, 'Bring me olive oil and ointments, and shut the garden doors so that I can bathe.' They did as she told them: they shut the doors of the garden and went out by the side doors to bring what they had been commanded; they did not see the elders, because they were hiding.

When the maids had gone out, the two elders got up and ran to her. They said, 'Look, the garden doors are shut, and no one can see us. We are burning with desire for you; so give your consent, and lie with us. If you refuse, we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and this was why you sent your maids away.'

Susanna groaned and said, 'I am completely trapped. For if I do this, it will mean death for me; if I do not, I cannot escape your hands. I choose not to do it; I will fall into your hands, rather than sin in the sight of the Lord.'

Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and the two elders shouted against her. And one of them ran and opened the garden doors. When the people in the house heard the shouting in the garden, they rushed in at the side door to see what had happened to her. And when the elders told their story, the servants felt very much ashamed, for nothing like this had ever been said about Susanna.

The next day, when the people gathered at the house of her husband Joakim, the two elders came, full of their wicked plot to have Susanna put to death. In the presence of the people they said, 'Send for Susanna daughter of Hilkiah, the wife of Joakim.' So they sent for her. And she came with her parents, her children, and all her relatives.

Now Susanna was a woman of great refinement and beautiful in appearance. As she was veiled, the scoundrels ordered her to be unveiled, so that they might feast their eyes on her beauty. Those who were with her and all who saw her were weeping.

Then the two elders stood up before the people and laid their hands on her head. Through her tears she looked up towards Heaven, for her heart trusted in the Lord. The elders said, 'While we were walking in the garden alone, this woman came in with two maids, shut the garden doors, and dismissed the maids. Then a young man, who was hiding there, came to her and lay with her. We were in a corner of the garden, and when we saw this wickedness we ran to them. Although we saw them embracing, we could not hold the man, because he was stronger than we are, and he opened the doors and got away. We did, however, seize this woman and asked who the young man was, but she would not tell us. These things we testify.'

Because they were elders of the people and judges, the assembly believed them and condemned her to death.

Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and said, 'O eternal God, you know what is secret and are aware of all things before they come to be; you know that these men have given false evidence against me. And now I am to die, though I have done none of the wicked things that they have charged against me!'

The Lord heard her cry. Just as she was being led off to execution, God stirred up the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel, and he shouted with a loud voice, 'I want no part in shedding this woman's blood!'

All the people turned to him and asked, 'What is this you are saying?' Taking his stand among them he said, 'Are you such fools, O Israelites, as to condemn a daughter of Israel without examination and without learning the facts? Return to court, for these men have given false evidence against her.'

So all the people hurried back. And the rest of the elders said to him, 'Come, sit among us and inform us, for God has given you the standing of an elder.' Daniel said to them, 'Separate them far from each other, and I will examine them.'

When they were separated from each other, he summoned one of them and said to him, 'You old relic of wicked days, your sins have now come home, which you have committed in the past, pronouncing unjust judgements, condemning the innocent and acquitting the guilty, though the Lord said, "You shall not put an innocent and righteous person to death." Now then, if you really saw this woman, tell me this: Under what tree did you see them being intimate with each other?' He answered, 'Under a mastic tree.' And Daniel said, 'Very well! This lie has cost you your head, for the angel of God has received the sentence from God and will immediately cut you in two.'

Then, putting him to one side, he ordered them to bring the other. And he said to him, 'You offspring of Canaan and not of Judah, beauty has beguiled you and lust has perverted your heart. This is how you have been treating the daughters of Israel, and they were intimate with you through fear; but a daughter of Judah would not tolerate your wickedness. Now then, tell me: Under what tree did you catch them being intimate with each other?' He answered, 'Under an evergreen oak.' Daniel said to him, 'Very well! This lie has cost you also your head, for the angel of God is waiting with his sword to split you in two, so as to destroy you both.'

Then the whole assembly raised a great shout and blessed God, who saves those who hope in him. And they took action against the two elders, because out of their own mouths Daniel had convicted them of bearing false witness; they did to them as they had wickedly planned to do to their neighbour. Acting in accordance with the law of Moses, they put them to death. Thus innocent blood was spared that day.

Hilkiah and his wife praised God for their daughter Susanna, and so did her husband Joakim and all her relatives, because she was found innocent of a shameful deed. And from that day onwards Daniel had a great reputation among the people.

Mark 9: 33-37

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."