

ALL IN SLIDE

All-In Offerings begin today

Nativity Series Slide

If its not clear from my sense of humor- I'm a Dad.

When I read stuff that accurately describes the deep torment & joy that it is to be a father- I remember it. Because there is something about people identifying in their own words both the great honor and thrill of parenting these children that you love in a way you have never loved anyone else- that is strangely mixed with the suffering and anguish that comes with loving someone in a way you've never loved anyone else.

For example- the phrase "Makes me proud. Breaks my heart." I read that in a brilliantly emotional essay from the actor Rob Lowe about dropping his son off at college several years ago. I have a million applications for that phrase with my own sons as they've grown up. Every new stage they enter in maturity- it "Makes me proud"- because they are growing up- but also "Breaks my heart"- *because they are growing up.*

I've also read heartbreaking books about people who's Dads were tragically cold and unloving. Like Andre Agassi's Open and the biography of Charles Schulz- who drew the comic strip "Peanuts". To hear these men longing for their fathers to notice them...and care about them...is heartbreaking in its own right.

There is an interesting phrase that comes up in the first chapter of Luke's gospel that had me thinking about these men and their dads. And had me thinking about my own relationship with my sons. And had me thinking about Christmas.

Its a prophecy about John the Baptist. The prophecy is spoken to John's father- Zechariah- about his son- that he doubts will ever be born.

Luke 1:15-17

For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and will never drink wine or beer. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb. 16 He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people."

This passage had me thinking- What does it mean that the hearts of fathers will turn to their children? And how will that will get people prepared for Jesus?

One way to start to answer this question comes from another book I read about

I read a book a few years ago called "Beautiful Boy" by David Sheff. Its a memoir that describes the agonizing journey of loving his son through an addiction to Crystal Meth that nearly destroyed him.

Title Slide "Beautiful Boy: How Spiritual Renewal Comes to Us"- Luke 1:26-45

David Sheff is an atheist. Intellectually, he doesn't believe God exists.

But when Nic was out of control, checking himself out of rehab facilities only to hit the streets to find Meth again... after David had exhausted all his resources and done all he knew to do...and had come to the end of himself.

...this self-proclaimed Atheist...would find himself...praying. Instinctively...praying. A reflex to the pain and suffering that was so deep in his complicated relationship with his son.

Here's David Sheff in his own words:

"I don't know how to pray and I cannot conceive of a god to pray to. {But} here I am with Nic using again and I know that there is nothing I can do and I cannot believe that we are here again and that the next telephone call could be the one I have feared for the past half-dozen years, and I am praying.

Please God heal Nic. Please God heal Nic. Please God heal Nic.

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I am in a silent war against an enemy as pernicious and omnipresent as evil. Evil? I don't believe in evil any more than I believe in God."

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I rage against his struggle and pain and how his addiction has caused so much pain in our lives and I'm also filled with boundless love for him, the miracle of Nic and all he has all he has brought to our lives. I rage against this God I don't believe in and yet pray to and thank him for Nic and for the hope that I have."

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The families have a collective group therapy session. Its an appallingly vulnerable position- group therapy with an audience. but I admit that its a relief to say whats on my mind. When Nic speaks, I feel a range of emotions- anxiety, fear, exaggeration, anger, sorrow, remorse- and there are

bursts of pride and dangerous flashes of memory of what we have had, and of love. I want to open up and hear Nic and believe him, but I am unwilling to tear down the fragile dam that I have constructed to protect myself. I am afraid I'll be drowned.

But parents are suckers. I am a sucker to contemplate opening to the idea of healing. And yet...suddenly I recall when I prayed for Nic. I never planned to pray. I just looked back and realized I had been praying.

So I prayed [again], Please God heal Nic. Please God heal every ravaged person in this room, the dear ravaged people on this planet, the dear wounded people. I look around at them. They are brave. They are here. However they got here, they are here. They are here and there is a chance.”- David Sheff, *Beautiful Boy*

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David Sheff is talking about the other families in the rehab program. The fathers and mothers and sons and daughters who have been through hell and back together- at their wits ends- now turning toward each other with hope.

I think there is something in that moment that David Sheff has that is similar to what Luke is writing about when he quotes the angel Gabriel quoting the prophet Malachi speaking to Zechariah about his son.

And this hope- of Fathers hearts turning to children- and the unrighteous heeding the wisdom of the righteous- in order to prepare the way of Jesus...well its on full display when Gabriel the angel shows up to announce the advent of Jesus to Mary. And that's where we'll turn now.

Luke 1:26-45

26 In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And the angel came to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be. 30 Then the angel told her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end."

34 Mary asked the angel, "How can this be, since I have not had sexual relations with a man? "

35 The angel replied to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 And consider your relative Elizabeth — even she has conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called childless. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God."

38 "See, I am the Lord's servant," said Mary. "May it happen to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

39 In those days Mary set out and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judah 40 where she entered Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped inside her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 Then she exclaimed with a loud cry,

“Blessed are you among women, and your child will be blessed! 43 How could this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For you see, when the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby leaped for joy inside me. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill what he has spoken to her! ”

1) Sex & Gender are both emphasized & de-emphasized in the Nativity. Spiritual Renewal is only emphasized.

We are just beginning a year where we are looking deeply into what the Scripture says about Sex & Gender & Spiritual Renewal. And while I didn't intend to preach directly about this during this Advent series- it was impossible for me to ignore it because its on full display in this passage.

So I want to point it out to you- not so much to make a huge point- but just as another building block as we read Scripture to build our understanding of it.

First of all- its undeniable that there is an emphasis sex and gender playing a role in Jesus' birth- and therefore the salvation and redemption of the world.

v 15

In this prophecy about John the Baptist being the one that Malachi prophesied about you have both gender roles & spiritual renewal.

First- it says that John the Baptist will be “filled with the Spirit” from his mother's womb.

I want to point out here- that this is a pre-born person- being filled with the Spirit. I am almost positive- that you will not find any place in Scripture where a non-human is filled with the Holy Spirit.

In other words- though the Scripture is not trying to make a scientific claim here- it is clear that the John the Baptist- is John the Baptist while he is in his mothers womb.

He is a human, filled with the Holy Spirit, as a pre-born person.

v 41

Additionally- when Elizabeth goes to visit Mary- pregnant with Jesus- She is filled with the Holy Spirit- and the pre-born John the Baptist leaps in her womb because she hears the voice of Mary- who is now pregnant with Jesus- who John the Baptist will remain excited about for the entirety of his life.

There is a connection here both with mothers and their babies.

v 15-17

And also- a connection with Fathers and their children. The prophecy of John the Baptist shows us that Holy Spirit prepares people for Jesus by turning the hearts of Fathers to their children- and by making the disobedient- or people who have been ignoring the calling of God to be image bearers and worshippers- the Spirit will bring an understanding of the way of the righteous.

That is SPIRITUAL RENEWAL.

Spiritual Renewal happens when the way you think, feel & act- changes from worship of self- to worship of God- which includes sacrifice for others.

Jesus, when asked about God's law- never uncoupled loving God with loving others. He left no room whatsoever for hating other human beings created in God's image- while you claimed to worship God.

Time and time again- he told stories of people who were willing to receive forgiveness from God- but not pass it on to other humans...and said "Nope". You don't understand God or forgiveness if you do that.

He told stories of people who had unresolved hate or disputes against others- and they would come to the temple to offer worshipful sacrifice to God. Jesus said- first- go to your brother or sister and be reconciled to them- then come back and do this formal act of worship.

In other words- Jesus is not ok with holding grudges- sinning against other people- operating in unforgiveness- and then talking or posting about how much you love God.

He says- thats impossible. He even said- the way you treat the least of these- the least important people- thats what you think about me.

So now, lets think about Fathers turning their hearts to their children- as a part of preparing to worship Jesus as Lord.

Malachi 4:5-6a (end at "to their fathers") & Luke 1:17

Look at the original OT prophecy from Malachi.

Notice that it also includes children turning their hearts back to their Fathers.

I think what is going on here- is that this is a call on who needs to make the first move on compassion. One- Gabriel is talking to a father. So he need not emphasize the child's role in reconciling this relationship. But 2- I think he is emphasizing the father's role in making the first move to turn from selfish, self-centered living- to a sacrificial step of humility and compassion- even toward a wayward child.

Remember what David Sheff said about his addict son Nic?

I want to open up and hear Nic and believe him, but I am unwilling to tear down the fragile dam that I have constructed to protect myself. I am afraid I'll be drowned.

But parents are suckers. I am a sucker to contemplate opening to the idea of healing. And yet...suddenly I recall when I prayed for Nic. I never planned to pray. I just looked back and realized I had been praying.

So I prayed [again], Please God heal Nic.

This is a Father making the first move. Despite the long list of wrongs that Nic had done- the way he had brought chaos and turmoil into his family's life- David takes the vulnerable risky step- to open himself up- in compassion for his son once again.

And this atheist- in that incredibly risky and scary move- instinctively connects with a God he doesn't even believe in.

City Church- let me ask you something. If this is present in the life of an atheist- what about all of us fathers that claim to be Christians. Could the spiritual revival we have been praying and waiting for- could it be we aren't prepared for that because of the

grudges we hold- the unwillingness to be compassionate and sacrificial toward our families?

A mark of Spiritual Renewal happening in you and in our church will be when fathers are repenting first and turning in compassion, with great risk and vulnerability- toward our children.

Fathers- and mothers too. It can be really difficult to take the first step of compassion with our kids. To admit your fault first. To not use your power and authority to domineer or force your way- rather to identify your own sin- and boldly confess it and repent from it in front of your children.

I think it is as- or more shaping- to a child to see the humility of a parent in confession and repentance than it is for a child to see a parent who believes they get everything right.

Not a Father? or a parent?- this prophecy doesn't end there.

Luke 1:17

Also contained as a parallel here is that the disobedient will understand the way of the righteous.

This is another way to put repentance that leads to spiritual renewal.

Those that have looked for a long time at the Scripture, or those following Jesus and have said, "That doesn't make sense to me." When Spiritual Renewal happens- there will start to be a softening to the way of Jesus and an understanding right and wrong in a way that moves the person from the center of their own universe- and starts to prioritize the lives of others in love.

You know how this best happens? When the church acts in sacrificial love and humility to outsiders. That's how they start to get it. When the body of Christ is doing the love and work of Christ. This helps the penny to drop for those who don't think much of the way of Jesus- or his church.

And that requires humility and repentance on our part. Less finger pointing and culture war- more hospitality and removing the log from our own eye- so we can see clearly to remove the speck from our brother or sister.

Back to 1)

Now- just when you think- Well I don't fit then. I'm single. I'm not a parent. I don't fit this nuclear family idea. Well- the Bible also under-emphasizes these traditional sex & gender roles.

1:34

Remember this is a "virgin birth".

In receiving this calling from God, Mary (and Joseph) have to make a huge sacrifice. They will be outcasts in their community. It will appear as if Mary is pregnant either from another man- or before they were married. Both of which would have had them on the outs in a shame-honor culture.

And for Jesus- the most important human being in the history of the world- he is both conceived and born through non-conventional means.

And let's not forget- that both of these impossible births- Jesus and JtB- these men grow up to be- single. Unmarried.

They themselves are not Fathers. And yet- we know how important Jesus is- and Jesus says that there is no man born of woman- that is greater than JtB.

Back to 1)

Here's the thing.

Over the course of this next year- as we talk about SG/SR- its going to be really tempting to think that the most important thing is S&G. But our church, this City, or our world is not going to turn to Jesus because we have solid, traditional nuclear families.

Rather- what the Bible consistently points to is Humility, confession, repentance and faith that leads to loving God and others more than ourselves.

The way we use our sex & gender certainly models that. Pregnant mothers sacrificing to nourish and grow their babies. Humble fathers moving in compassion toward their children. Marriages that show off sacrificial love and point to Jesus coming back to make all things new.

But the point is brining everyone to follow Jesus as Lord- and that will always require Spiritual Renewal.

2) Following Jesus as Lord requires humble faith that surrenders control of your life to God- but it doesn't mean you stop asking questions- just that you open your ears for answers.

v 28-29

“wondered”- dialogizomai- accounting term- she tried to figure out how it all added up thinking things out. weigh in things. Like when I lost my microphone....I see what is going on...trying to figure out how in the world this happened. Or how did this mario game get in this closet

v 30

a response- a comfort from God- you won't do this alone

v 31

A call for a loss of control.

When she is told to name the child Jesus- control is being taken away from her.

What the angel is saying is, “Not this Child. If this Person is going to come into your life, Mary, if this Person is going to come into your life, people, he is in charge. You don't name him; he names you. You don't call the shots for him; he calls the shots for you.”

v 34

another question- similar to Zech except Zech is self-protective, Mary is in hope- ready to surrender. Mary ready to hear God's answer- Zech only wants to protect himself.

Like David Sheff- being vulnerable again to the possibility that God might bring him a son- or in Davids' case- bring his son back from Crystal Meth- just felt like it would hurt too bad.

But Mary is ready- she asks and listens. And she receives- not a complete answer or a promise of no pain. But she does receive comfort and the promise of a God who will never leave

v 35-37

Comfort- I am the God of the impossible. The Holy Spirit is in this. And this is the son of God. He even provides someone else to look to- Elizabeth- in which God has worked in a similar way.

v 38

Surrender

The kind that leads to revival. Its in my revival journal pages.

v 42-43

Remember David Sheff looking to others- As he prayed for his son- it expanded to praying for others. He was completely out of the center of his life-even if for only a moment.

Seminary prof who's child got cancer

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This is true of all of us. Yes repentance is hard. But do you believe that the Lord will fulfill what he says.

Matt 1:21

She will give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

to Joseph- This is what Jesus will do.