

Weekly Reflection – Advent: Love – “He made the first move.”

Christmas is about the reality that God Almighty Himself is the first mover in your story. In other words, before you even knew you needed a Savior, God became flesh and was born as a baby in a manger in Bethlehem, salvation moved toward us before we even knew we needed saving. God made the first move.

- ***“The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world”*** (Revelation 13:8): This deeply meaningful title for Jesus reminds us that God’s plan of redemption was set in place before He even created the beings who would be redeemed.
- ***“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” John 15:13 ESV***
- ***“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” 1 John 4:10 ESV***
- ***“but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8 ESV***
- ***“We love because he first loved us.” 1 John 4:19 ESV***

Luke 15:11-24

***“I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” Luke 15:18-19 ESV***

- There is a finely tuned nuance added to the story by the use of the word arise. As a prelude to his self-serving plan the prodigal thinks to himself, I will arise and go. A “resurrection” is needed, and at this point he thinks that he can accomplish that resurrection on his own.
- He wanted no grace—he can manage on his own. He did not offer to become a slave. Slaves are not paid. He needed money and asked to be trained as a skilled craftsman.
- “The ordinary slave was in some sense a member of the family, but the hired servant could be dismissed at a day’s notice. He was not one of the family at all.” (Barclay)
- And so, the son most likely was thinking, I’ve got to repay my dad. And the only way I can see paying back my dad is getting a job as one of my dad’s hired servants. And he had his speech ready and here he comes.
- But check out what happens.

***“And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” Luke 15:20 ESV***

- First, I’m stunned by the fact that when he saw him a long way off, he wasn’t filled with contempt for his son, rather with compassion. And when God sees you today, wherever you are in your state of life, He doesn’t have contempt for you, He has compassion for you. It doesn’t mean that consequences aren’t real. It doesn’t mean that God’s happy about the choices that you made. It just means He’s looking at you thinking, “I have compassion on your situation right now, so much, that it is going to prompt me right now to start running towards you.”
- The father, in this house, clearly represents God. And now we understand that God is running, and this is the craziest thing Jesus could have said. This is the greatest running event in history.
- What’s the big deal with the father running?
- When you look through the eyes and the lens of someone living in the Middle Eastern Palestinian world in the time of Jesus, no patriarch in the position of this father would ever run in public.

There's a community reputation at stake. It would be a disgrace to the father and be an embarrassment to the entire village. Because to run in public, he would pull his robe up and tuck it into his belt. And to do that he would expose his legs and that was disrespectful in this culture and would never happen. But this father said, I couldn't care less what the village thinks today. They will see my ankles and my shins and my knees and some of my thighs today because I'm running toward my boy today.

### Kezazah

I discovered there's something in play here called kezazah. Jesus doesn't explicitly mention it in the story, but it would be in the background of the mind of a listener seeing this through Palestinian eyes. That ceremony would happen if a Jewish boy married someone that the family didn't approve of, or if a Jewish boy lost his inheritance to a Gentile world and if the boy were to decide at any point that he wanted to return back home, he would have to come to the village and face the kezazah ceremony at the gates of the village.

If a Jewish boy lost the family inheritance among the Gentiles and dared to return home, the community would break a large pot in front of him and cry out "so-in-so is cut off from his people." This symbolized the broken relationship that existed between that person and the community. The ceremony would be led by the elders of the village and the father of the boy was not allowed to attend. The reason why is because in this culture a father's blessing, trumped community decisions.

### The Father was watching.

The dad was watching the road. Why? Because the dad had to get to his boy before his boy got to kezazah. The only chance that the dad had to put his arms around the boy was to get to him before he got to the gates of the village. The word run in Greek (*dramōn*) is the technical term used for the footraces in the stadium. Paul uses this word a number of times in this sense (1 Corinthians 9:24, 26; Galatians 2:2; 5:7; 2 Thessalonians 3:1; Hebrews 12:1). We can translate the phrase, "His father saw him and had compassion and raced." It is not just a slow shuffle or a fast walk—he races! When he saw him a long way off he tucked up his robe and started to sprint. He said I don't care about what anybody thinks about me today I just want my boy to know what I think about him today. It is his "compassion" that leads the father to race out to his son. He knows what his son will face in the village. He takes upon himself the shame and humiliation due the prodigal.

Now listen to what the son says, ***"And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'"*** (Luke 15:21 ESV) The prodigal changes his mind and does not finish his speech. He can only put himself completely at the mercy of his father and say, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son." His surrender to his father's will is complete. At the beginning of the story he insisted on control over his own life. Now he leaves his destiny entirely in his father's hands. He is overwhelmed by this unexpected outpouring of costly love. This is repentance.

***"But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate." Luke 15:22-24 ESV***

- Remember how I mentioned the son using the word "arise", "I will arise and go to my father..." The father now says, "My son was dead, and is alive again." The father does not wait for the prodigal to

come to him but rather at great cost goes down and out to find and resurrect the one who is lost and dead.

- And on the road in that moment, reconciliation happened and it trumped kezazah so that when they returned together and came to the gates of the village, the boy already had the robe of his father's family. He had the ring of his dad's authority. He had the shoes that elevated him in the culture of the day. And he had his dad's arm around his shoulder, and they just walked right through the city gates and right to the house. And they had a party for that boy that night. He didn't get kezazah. He got the delight of His father, the love of His father.

### The Gospel.

Maybe you're thinking this whole gospel is too easy. This is not God saying there are no consequences. This is God announcing something called grace and when you fast forward to Good Friday, you now see and understand when Jesus hung on the cross he got kezazah. He literally got cut off. So much that he said, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" God Almighty smashed the pot of our sins at the foot of the cross of His Son and said, "Your cut off." They did that so that all of us in this place today, if we turn toward God, could get the open arms of the Father and an embrace and welcome home. Jesus got kezazah and we get grace and love and righteousness, and life.

The Scripture tells us ***"it is appointed for man once to die and then the judgment."* (Hebrews 9:27)** You are going to appear at the judgment seat of God, and you are going to give an account for your life. Do you really think you're going to be able to give some fancy speech to get in? Do you really think giving a list of all the good deeds you've done is going to work? You think that's what's gonna work when you arrive at the judgment seat of Christ? God is holy and just, that's why he had to run when you were a long way off and get to you before you got to the gates. ***"It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."* Romans 3:26 ESV** Christmas and the cross happened so that He might be just and the justifier. Your sin would be punished when God the Father punished His Son on the cross and you could receive by faith the righteousness of God.

So that when you got to the gate, you have His robe on your back, and His ring on your finger, and the shoes of the gospel of peace, and His arm around your shoulder so that you can walk into the gates of the eternal village of God already covered by the Father's blessing because the Father's blessing trumps kezazah every single time.