

Story, Scripture & reflection questions for worship on March 7th 2021.

For March 7th worship, you will need to be familiar with the fictional story I have written below. We will have a sermon/study time in worship that uses this story (which is based upon real situations that real people have found themselves in), and the scripture. Please read carefully, and answer the reflection questions so that you can be prepared to participate next Sunday.

Susie's Home on the Grand

- by Janaki Bandara

Usually when we think waterfront home, we think high-end real estate. People pay top dollar to own property that is right on the Grand River. And then there are those who are encamped on the river banks, not for the fun of it or for winter, but because they have no other place to call home. That's me. I'm Susie, and my home address is a tent, north of the water treatment plant by Myer's Road, on the east bank of the Grand River. I set up here in the fall of 2020, the year of the COVID, after my partner Ricky and I split up. More accurately, when I had to leave, for my own safety.

Ricky has what my case worker calls "anger issues", the language of which is violence, physical and sexual abuse. I moved in with Ricky when my parents kicked me out, right after high school. According to them, their responsibility for me only extended to that point. I had nowhere to go, no steady job, no first and last month's rent. Dad's violent temper and mom's submission to his anger was a valuable life lesson for me: keep your mouth shut and you will be ok.

But what happens when that life lesson fails you? And keeping your mouth shut just brings on more and more pain?

Ricky was 12 years older than me. We had started talking through a dating app while I was still living at home. I was 15 years old when Ricky be-friended me online, his attentions and compliments made me feel seen for the first time in my life; made me feel wanted and loved. He lived nearby, in Brantford ... kept asking when could he come and see me. I knew enough about internet safety to keep my details kind of private for some time. I wasn't trying to rush into anything.

But that night when dad got piss-drunk and started in on me, like he does, telling me how worthless I was, how I would amount to nothing, how mom trapped him by having me when he never wanted children to begin with ... when he finally got done beating me with his words, with mom cowering quietly in a corner trying not to make eye contact with either of us ... that night dad was extra vicious and I waited until I could safely leave the room, away from his meanness.

While I waited for the opportunity for a safe retreat, tears rolled down my cheeks but I knew better than to make a sound. Whimpering brought fists and feet into play. Words were bad enough.

Finally I escaped, quietly, like a mouse, into the basement. All I had with me was my phone, and Ricky was there, on Tinder waiting for me. He told me how much he was attracted to me, he asked me "Please, sweet girl, let me take you out for a coffee at least, so I can look into those pretty brown eyes of yours." And I wanted so very much to be wanted, to be loved, I agreed to meet him.

He was so sweet at first, he would bring me little gifts and shower me with compliments. He asked me to move in with him even before dad kicked me out. But when that day came, me with nowhere else to go, Ricky said "No problem, darlin', my house is your house, my bed is your bed." So it was. I moved.

Out of the frying pan into the fire. I wasn't ready to do the things Ricky wanted us to do. But I was living under his roof, dependent on him for everything. How could I say no? I was constantly reminded to be grateful to him for everything he was doing for me. Is it rape if you don't feel like you can say no? Is it consent because you have no other choice?

Ricky was smart. When he saw me sinking into depression, drifting away, “Try this” he said, offering me a pill. It worked for a while, creating a cloud of numbness through which everything was dulled: pain and pleasure alike. After some time, the pills became needles. I didn’t care much anymore: he gave me the pain and he supplied me to take it away. Once I was high consent was neither here nor there. He did what he wanted and it was like that for a while until I guess he got tired of supporting me.

He had connections in Brantford, and even though I wasn’t quite old enough, he got me a job at his friend’s bar down near Eagle Place. Marc paid in cash that was given straight to Ricky. Some story about he might get in trouble if the cops caught him paying a minor to serve alcohol.

The best thing about the job was that, for those hours every night, I was straight. Marc didn’t want me stoned or high on the job. And in those hours of bartending and serving, coping with the groping and comments from a progressively aggressive set of men, I began to think: I am better off on my own. I began to think I needed to find my feet.

When I began to ask for some money, even dad had given me a small allowance, Ricky got mad. “What do you need money for? I give you everything you need.” So I started pocketing whatever change I got in tips. Carefully hiding it in my boot, my toes fighting with the loonies and toonies, the nickels and dimes for soft spaces to rest. At home, I had a ziplock bag, hidden under a loose baseboard in the bedroom, behind my side of the bed. I added the tips to it every night, when Ricky was passed out cold in bed, and I would get up to pee.

I had one shot at getting out. I researched the options, thank God for the data plan on my phone. I knew how much it would cost me to get to Mary’s Place in Kitchener. I figured that was far enough away that he would not come find me. I waited for my chance. I got away.

The shelter was full when I arrived.

There was no room in the inn.

But it wasn’t all bad. A case worker was assigned to me, and the people there were good to me, temporary shelter was available at a hotel – specifically because of COVID – lucky me I guess. But try finding a job during this crazy time. That hotel room was not available indefinitely. My case worker helped to set me up with OW. I used my first cheque to do what I saw many other professional homeless people do: buy a tent and a sleeping bag; next cheque was some camping gear. By the time I got turned out, when the Region cut funding for the hotels, I was ready to set up my home on the Grand.

My case worker provided some bus tickets, and a place where my cheque could be collected. I made new “friends” and learnt that the riverbanks in Cambridge might be good for camping. You could catch fish in it, which, for the hobby fishermen was catch and release. But for me became fresh protein. Once every two weeks or so, I would walk to Food Basics or Giant Tiger, fill my pull along bag with supplies, and walk (as long as the weather was good) back to my home on the Grand. When the snow came down hard, I would splurge on a cab, crossing the trail where people walked for exercise ... I could only imagine such a life.

We learn a lot from living on the land. No weather app is better than beaver. They always found ways to tell us when the water would rise – posting their meteorological reports on the saplings with their teeth. We stayed as close as we could to the water’s edge. It’s safer that way – safer from the human predators. Plus: the next best thing to indoor plumbing.

Two other women have tents near me. We watch out for each other. We all have our issues. We had all escaped men like Ricky. We all learned early to dull our pain with whatever we could find. We figured if we could make it through COVID and be super careful with what we have, this “living rough” (as the Food Bank called it) would soon be over. And we would have enough saved up for first and last month’s rent. Somewhere. Somehow.

In the meantime, hey, people pay top dollar for waterfront property. Maybe this isn’t all that bad. Who needs room in the inn when waterfront property is available, right?

Isaiah 58: 6-12

“This is the kind of fast day I’m after:
to break the chains of injustice,
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,
free the oppressed,
cancel debts.

What I’m interested in seeing you do is:
sharing your food with the hungry,
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,
being available to your own families.

Do this and the lights will turn on,
and your lives will turn around at once.
Your righteousness will pave your way.
The God of glory will secure your passage.
Then when you pray, God will answer.
You’ll call out for help and I’ll say, ‘Here I am.’

“If you get rid of unfair practices,
quit blaming victims,
quit gossiping about other people’s sins,
If you are generous with the hungry
and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,
Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,
your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.

I will always show you where to go.
I’ll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—
firm muscles, strong bones.

You’ll be like a well-watered garden,
a gurgling spring that never runs dry.

You’ll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,
rebuild the foundations from out of your past.
You’ll be known as those who can fix anything,
restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate,
make the community livable again. [The Message Translation]

Questions for Reflection:

1. In the story when you hear the line “there was no room in the inn” what does it remind you of?
2. How do you feel about the story Susie shares and her “squatters rights” on the banks of the Grand River? Do you think she and others in her circumstances were justified in their approaches?
3. Have you ever encountered a person in similar circumstances to Susie’s? Have you ever had such experiences? If you can imagine yourself in her shoes, what kind of community response would you be praying for?
4. In your spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, scripture study, meditation or otherwise, how does God nudge you to respond to the hungry, the homeless, the shivering ill-clad?
5. The lights are mostly off at church these days; the rooms are mostly empty (though heated). What resonance if any is there for you when you think of these lights off, empty rooms at church, versus the claim God makes in the Isaiah reading:
“Do this and the lights will turn on,
and your lives will turn around at once.
...
I will always show you where to go.
I’ll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—
firm muscles, strong bones.”?
6. Do you hunger or thirst to glow in the darkness, do you yearn for your life to be bathed in sunlight? If you are already there, how can you share your light with others?
7. When you think of our city, our Preston downtown core especially our laneways, the riverbanks of Galt, do you think of ruins or healthy communities? Do you see hope or despair? How might we as a community of God be part of an initiative of rebuilding and renovating? What role might we play in restoring old ruins?