

After the Tears, What Are We Looking For?

Easter 2021

John 20:1-18

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I wonder how many of you, like me have been part of the uptick in binge watching various shows during our long periods of home boundedness? One of the gems worthy of your time which came out in 2020 was *The Queen's Gambit* on Netflix. In fact, just between October and November of 2020, 62 million people had watched it, and the show set off a resurgence in an interest in chess for all ages.

Just in case you don't know, in the world of chess, *the queen's gambit* refers to an opening (white plays her queen's pawn to the fourth square) that leads to a sacrifice of a pawn for the sake of greater gain in the opener's game.

The series tells the story of Beth Harmon, whom we meet in an orphanage when she was eight. We are invited into her life over a ten-year period as she becomes a young woman and a world-class chess player.

Beth's passion for chess begins when she wanders down into the basement of the orphanage one day to find the custodian, the gruff Mr. Shaibel, sitting in front of a chess board. It's how he spends his free time. Over a period of time, she continues to visit him, and she coaxes him to teach her how to play, thus beginning a mentorship which leads her to her calling.

But to put it mildly, Beth is awkward in her relationships. Along the way, she struggles against both drug addiction and alcoholism. Those who have analyzed the story have focused upon those dependencies and

their roots in Beth's childhood: her mother's mental illness and suicide, the abandonment of her adoptive father, her anxious psycho-sexual development, and her alienation from most people around her, except for her good friend at the orphanage, Jolene. Much of the drama in this limited series draws from the complex connections between her genius and her destructive dependencies. So, realistically, it's amazing that she finds any way to thrive and succeed.

I won't tell you of all of the ins and outs, especially of her chess career, which is astonishing to watch... but the thing which made this story worthy of telling on THIS day, is the redemptive move which happens after so much destruction in her relationships.

In her darkest moment, when she is faced with utter destruction from her alcohol abuse while simultaneously facing the pinnacle of her chess career, her only childhood friend Jolene shows up on her doorstep. She had been searching for Beth for some time. The two decide to return to the orphanage of their youth. She goes back down to the basement where her love for chess began at the tutelage of the very gruff Mr. Sheibel. He has long since died, but she finds a picture of the two of them which he has kept over all the years... along with clippings of her various successes. In that moment, she is finally able to grieve the loss of that gruff but loving mentor ~ the closest thing to a father she had known. In that moment, she stumbles upon profound acceptance, perhaps for the first time in her life.

German theologian Paul Tillich wrote of that theological theme in one of his sermons in a collection entitled *The Shaking of the Foundations* (1948). In that sermon, Tillich describes a sudden and illuminating moment of grace at the point of deep despair as follows:

“Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as though a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted.

You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. ... Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you have been accepted!’ If that happens to us, we experience grace.”

That’s what happened in the murky basement of Beth’s life.

Our Easter story begins in darkness. When Mary Magdalene and the disciples arrived and saw the body of Jesus was gone, they made all sorts of assumptions. They panicked in their grief. They were afraid and they ran away. They didn’t know what to do. Mary, however, stayed and wept. Her grief overcame her. All her hopes had been dashed. She was grieving not only the death of her beloved, but now with what she and the others had assumed was the theft of his body, it was beyond bearable.

But, thank God, that was NOT the end of the story... and it still is not the end of the story...

The angels came and, comforted her asking “Why are you weeping?” She answered the best way she could through her tears. Then the risen one came to her, and asked her the same question followed by “Whom are you looking for?” Then he called her by her name: Mary. That’s when she recognized him and she called him by name, Rabbouni ~ the term for teacher. It was affectionate, vulnerable and all-embracing. By calling each other by their names, a special sense of kinship was communicated. She knew she was fully accepted.

Just as it wasn’t the end of the story for Mary and subsequently for the disciples, the same is true for us today. The risen one comes to us in the same way... after all our tears, after the grieving and mourning, the risen one comes, calling us by our name, saying: Why are you weeping? What

are you looking for? Whom are you looking for? It was as if the writer of John's account harkened back to the beginning of the Gospel in chapter 1 which is read at Christmas as a sign for what the life of Christ brings:

“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:3-5).

In that moment, there was no darkness. The light of pure grace, acceptance and love burst into being and changed Mary in the same way it changes us... as individuals and as communities.

For the last few years, we in church leadership and congregational life have been warned that life as we knew it in the church would be changing. More and more, we were told people were not associating with any congregation, per se. They were doing their own thing. And then COVID hit last year, and that warning sped things up. In addition, we have all gone through periods of mourning losses of loved ones, losses of independence and even life as we knew it.

Now, as we begin to move back into our sanctuaries and reconnect in person, pastors and congregants are asking, are people going to return after a majority of the country gets vaccinated, and we reach herd immunity, whatever that looks like? Will the church EVER be the same again? Will people find faith in the ways to which we have been accustomed? That anxiety and grief in the church has been going on for quite some time.

Here's the thing. It won't be the same because WE are not the same.

COVID has changed us. But Easter changes us as well. Mary and the disciples went expecting one thing and came away with an entirely different way of being and operating.

Mary had been mourning... but an encounter with Jesus transformed her very being. So it is with us and the church.

If this year has taught or reminded us of anything, it's that we're powerless over so much. That we can't do it on our own and that there are forces beyond us that can be destructive as well as good.

This is a summoning of faith and hope... after the tears, there is a new story for us. A new kind of ministry is beginning. Just as when the disciples called out to this Rabbi, he invited them to "Come and see" (John 1:39) what was happening. This is a time we are being called to see the new things that God is doing in our lives and in our world.

This is the time for the church to shine in all its glory... and THIS is the day to amplify the message of hope, love and acceptance that the Love of God in Christ is here to bring life out of chaos and death; to bring unity where there was division.

May it be so, alleluia! Amen!