

1 Sermon, March 20, 2011

Texts: Genesis 9:18-27, James 2:14-17

Title: "Nakedness and Privacy"

Central idea: Our bodies are created by God and sacred. privacy is the same as needing space to grow and be respected.

1. Strange story of seeing/not seeing father's nakedness
2. What makes Noah's drunken nakedness shameful?
3. Curse of Canaan
4. How does that relate to privacy today?
5. James - We do a good deed to cover someone's nakedness

1. Strange story of seeing/not seeing father's nakedness

Today's reading from Genesis is probably not among the most popular texts being preached on this week. It shows the all-too-fallible humanness of the Bible heroes.

Noah gets drunk with the first wine harvest after the big flood, and falls into a drunken sleep in his tent, naked.

His son Ham sees his father naked, and tells his brothers.

And then his brother Shem & Japheth, take a garment and cover their father's nakedness in a very awkward way. They walk backwards with the garment between them so that they do not look on their father's nakedness.

And when Noah wakes up, hungover and crabby, what does he do? He curses his son Ham and Ham's son, Canaan. Now, if our values were applied to this story, we would say that it was Noah's own fault. He should not have gotten drunk.

We might say that Ham did a good thing to tell his brothers about his father's nakedness. Only when they knew about his nakedness could they cover him.

But that's not how the story goes. Instead, what Ham did was seen as shameful. He looked upon his father's nakedness. Even if he did it by accident, the Bible looks on it as shameful.

Today, it's different. Actor Bill Cosby wrote in his book, *Fatherhood*:

A new father quickly learns that his child invariably comes to the bathroom at precisely the times when he's in there, as if he needed company. The only way for this father to be certain of bathroom privacy is to shave at the gas station.

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2. What makes Noah's drunken nakedness shameful?

So, what makes Noah's drunken nakedness shameful?

Well, the problem doesn't seem to be the drunkenness, or even the nakedness, but the fact that someone looked upon Noah's nakedness.

It's not *being* naked that is the problem; it's *exposing another person's nakedness*.

It's right there in the commandments of Leviticus 18 and 20

None of you shall approach anyone near of kin to uncover nakedness: I am the LORD. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is the nakedness of your father. You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether born at home or born abroad.

And the passage goes on for quite a few more verses.

3. Curse of Canaan

Uncovering a person's nakedness was seen as such a sin that Noah cursed his grandson. It's a puzzling thing that he should curse his grandson, rather than his son who saw him naked, and that's why we should look a little further at the names in the story. The names of Noah's grandsons were names of nations in early Old Testament times.

So the text gives an explanation for the social order that the ancient Hebrews experienced. Noah is quoted as saying:

"Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers."

He also said, "Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. May God make space for Japheth, and let him live in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave."

So this text actually justifies some people being slaves to other people. It may even have helped to justify the Israelites war against their neighbors the Canaanites.

This text was also, in fact, long used to justify slavery of Africans in America. African slaves were seen as descendents of Ham, and therefore it was OK that they be slaves.

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4. How does that relate to privacy today?

OK, you might say, but what does that have to do with me? Slavery isn't a fact any more.

Well, there are no legal slaves any more, but there is a lot of human trafficking in the world today, especially of young people for the sex trade.

There may not be human trafficking in our community, but there is the shaming of people's bodies through pornography, which is available at the nearest internet connection.

And this is where nakedness and privacy are deeply spiritual issues today. Uncovering someone's nakedness, is still sinful in many cases.

It's not a sin in the locker room, when you undress yourself, and others are also naked. It's not a sin when a parent gives a child a bath.

What is sinful is when a person's nakedness is uncovered against their will or without their knowledge, or to make money.

When our bodies are on display against our will, or without our knowledge or in order to make money, our bodies have been demeaned. God made our bodies. I Corinthians 3:16-17 reads:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

It comes down to a view of our bodies as sacred. We are made by God, and there are parts of us that just shouldn't be exposed by another person, or that would be a degradation of that sacredness. Without privacy, there is exploitation.

It may be that the Bible gives us a precursor of a "right to privacy" assumed under modern law.

William O Douglas, a US Supreme Court justice, said in 1965: We deal with a right of privacy older than the Bill of Rights—older than our political parties, older than our school system.

Even between spouses or in the closest friendship, there has to be some privacy -- a respecting of the other person's boundaries.

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It's when those boundaries get violated that we have big problems. A few weeks ago, we presented the safe sanctuaries program we are putting into place to protect our children and youth. Criminal background checks, a two adult rule, etc. are ways to protect children and youth. It is also strongly connected to privacy.

5. James - We do a good deed to cover someone's nakedness

Which brings us to the reading from the letter of James:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2:14-17, NRSV).

If we really believe in privacy, and in the sacredness of our bodies, we will want to help clothe the naked, and give a measure of respect to all persons.

The same mandate to clothe the naked is in the Old Testament prophet Isaiah:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isaiah 58:6-7, NRSV).

Clothing the naked today can mean giving money to United Methodist Children's Services in Milwaukee. They maintain a clothing bank to help people in need. Or it could mean giving to Kindred Kids in Columbus, where Wendy Simyab works to help families who cannot afford much in the way of clothing for their children.

Clothing the naked today could mean giving to the Center for Missing and Exploited Children, who advocate for prosecution of those who produce child pornography.

Or it could mean contributing to the International Justice Mission, which helps restore victims of sex trafficking to dignity and independence. IJM also helps people who have been de-facto slaves to

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gain a new life. They do this around the world by training lawyers to work on behalf of the ones who have no voice.

In Thailand, a 14-year-old girl named Panida hoped to spend her summer break earning some extra money. Her father had died and her mother was stricken with AIDS. When a local man approached her offering a well-paying job that would last four months, she accepted. However, the man took Panida through a border checkpoint into Malaysia, where he sold her to a local brothel owner.

However, on the very night on which Panida was to sell her body for the first time, Malaysian police, prompted to action by information provided through International Justice Mission undercover investigations, entered the brothel and released Panida and 94 other trafficking victims.

An IJM caseworker contacted Panida's mother in Thailand, who was overjoyed to hear that her daughter was safe. IJM paid the cost to reunite Panida and her mother and to sponsor Panida's continuing education. Panida is now home again.

Clothing the naked has not gone out of fashion. It is still something the gospel wants us to do. It is a matter of simple respect for our bodies, which are the temple of the Holy Spirit, made by God and loved by God.

Amen.