

# A BROAD PERSPECTIVE

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2016

*In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **Forbidden Love, Unknown to Each Other**

Last weekend my wife and I went on a date with dinner and a play called *Once*. It is the story of a potential love between a boy who is Irish and a girl who is Czech. This of course gets my attention because I am mostly English, and Tracy is Czech.

However, it was a forbidden love, a fact unknown to the audience until late in the drama and was also unknown each to the other for they both had other relationships. Yet both of those previous relationships were problematic, wounded, and perhaps fatally wounded.

Nevertheless, the two of them are falling in love, and in a moment of tenderness that grips your attention, she says to him, "I love you," but she says it in Czech. He replies, "What did you mean by what you just said?" Put on the spot, she pauses, and then says, "What it meant was, it's going to rain."

While you're watching this beautiful scene, you had the feeling that we've all seen in movies, where they're about to kiss, and their faces come closer and closer and their lips are about to touch when BAM! Somebody comes in or the phone rings, and the spell is broken. The magic is gone, and they're not going to kiss after all.

There is immense power in saying, "I love you." This is particularly the case for a couple when it's their first time uttering those

words. And you can see why she backed off, a little afraid, saying it in a language he wouldn't understand, and then not telling him the truth when he asked.

## **Can I Keep It? Well, There's More to It**

My talk this morning is about one word, a Hebrew verb that is one of the ways God says, "I love you," not in a romantic way, but rather in a mundane, parental way. "Shamar" is a simple Hebrew word, usually translated as "to keep," also "to guard, observe, protect, have charge of, preserve."

Imagine a little kid who finds an abandoned kitten. He picks it up, runs home, and excitedly says, "Mommy, mommy, I found this little kitten! It must be lost. Can I please keep it?"

Ah, that word "keep." Here you get to the essence of it. The childish mind thinks, "I'd like to have this kitten, and I want to play with it." But the adult mind thinks, "Oh, there's so much more to it than that. We must feed it. We must find a place for it to sleep at night. There will be vet bills. Count on it. Shots will be necessary. Food, shelter, bills, there's the play.

In the childish mind, a little kitten is like a thing, a toy to play with. In the adult mind, it's not a thing. It's a being, a sentient being. And there's a commitment of time, of energy, of who I am in the covenantal way of the new being that's joining the family.

## **Keep a Vow, Keep Guard, Keep Sabbath**

That is the essence of the words “to keep, shamar.” In its essence, it is covenantal. Let me give you a couple of examples:

In our everyday language, we often use the phrase “to keep a vow.” Perhaps at a wedding ceremony, you say something like that, but then that’s just the beginning of it. That’s hardly the whole of it. “I, Bob, take thee, Elizabeth, to be my wedded wife, and I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses to be thy loving and faithful husband in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health as long as we both shall live, so help me God.” It’s not just a few words, but the whole of it, until death do we part.

Or we talk about the military keeping a watch. You’re in hostile territory, and you select a few from your company to stay awake, to keep guard. But I, along with every one of you, know how hard it is to stay awake in the wee hours of the morning when getting forty winks is a powerful urge. But you don’t dare fall asleep because you made a promise. You are keeping the watch because lives may depend upon it.

People of the Jewish faith keep the Sabbath, meaning not all persons are good at this. We have jobs on the Sabbath. They observe it, but in a deeper, fuller, all-encompassing way as part of their lives.

The very first use of this word in the scriptures is in Genesis 2:15, where it says, “And the Lord God placed man in the garden to keep it.”

Probably the most famous usage of this word is only two chapters later. Cain has killed his brother Abel and has tucked his body behind some bushes. The Lord God is walking in the

garden and says to Cain, “Where’s your brother?” With a rather contemptuous response, Cain asks, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

More than one theologian has said that the entire balance of the scriptures is nothing more than a “yes” answer to that irreverent question. “Yes, you are your brother’s keeper.”

## **The Thorn Is the Sheep’s Corral**

In Hebrew words, there are usually only three letters, so in this case the “sh” is a “shin,” and then “m” and “r.” Even though it’s a translation, “sh-m-r” can be used in other forms of words. It gets very complex. But the root of those three letters, the most ancient, deepest root of them, is rather odd.

It means “thorn,” and the idea was that you keep sheep, and at night you bring them together and use your knife to trim off thorn bushes. These you place around the sheep, and it prevents night predators, keeps them without, and it keeps the sheep within. So the root meaning of it is “thorn,” to corral these sheep around and keep them safe at night.

The opposite of the word “shamar” is “parar,” which means “to discard” or “to abuse, to trample, to throw away.” From that vow, you get the distinction “to cherish” or “to throw away, to hold” or “to abuse.”

Stay with me a little more. You’ll see where I’m going very shortly. If you look once more at the end of Psalm 121, the one Phyllis Martin read. It concludes — it has the word “keep” in it half a dozen times — but it concludes this way: “The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.” The word there is “nephesh,” meaning your soul. “He will keep your going out and your coming in now and forevermore.”

That last part of it, “your going out and your coming in now and forevermore,” is just fancy poetic language for space-time. Whenever you go for all time, God will keep you from all evil. God will hold onto and cherish and preserve your soul for all time no matter where you go — one of the great promises that we find in the scriptures.

### **The Christmas Story = the Book of Shamar**

Now, here’s the point: Today is the Fourth Sunday of Advent. We’ve been looking at this Christmas story, different facets of it, for this season. We have Mary and Joseph. Gab

riel, angels, shepherds, the manger, a star, the magi. The one simple thought that I would like to leave with you this Sunday morning is this: Consider all of that — Mary and Joseph, Gabriel, the angels, shepherds, the manger, a star, the magi — all of that as merely Chapter I of the Book of Shamar.

The story concludes with us falling into the everlasting arms as we draw our last breath, punctuating, almost weekly, from the beginning all the way to our end is a phrase that you have heard many times:

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

*Amen.*