**The Gospel According to *A Star Is Born***

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, Feb. 3, 2019

Scripture: James 3:13-18

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As the curtains rise in the movie *A Star is Born*, Jackson Maine, a Country and Western hero, is singing at a sold-out concert before adoring fans. He’s rich, famous, and good looking. But it soon becomes clear that Jackson is also fighting demons.

Jackson is the child of an abusive and alcoholic father. Jackson tried to escape his father at age 13, unsuccessfully, by suicide. Now Jackson needs drugs to get through concerts. He finishes off a bottle of Jack Daniels as soon as the show is over. He physically fights with his brother. He has tinnitus, which means he can’t hear what he’s singing. He wets himself at the Grammys. He fails at rehab. Jackson is a good man who is joined at the hip to tragedy.

In any case, after the opening concert scene, Jackson stumbles into a bar where Ally works as a singer. She is not living the dream. She’s a down-on-her-luck wannabe-star who slings garbage at work and covers songs at a seedy bar, nights.

For Jackson, Ally is love at first sight. They spend the night discussing song writing. And ultimately, Jackson invites Ally to sing her own song, “Shallow,” at one of his shows. You just saw that scene and heard the song.

For the rest of the movie, Ally’s star rises as Jackson’s falls. They fall in love, get married, but don’t live happily ever after. Why not?

The lyrics to “Shallow,” printed in your bulletins, get at some of their big issues. Ally wrote this song about Jackson on the night they first met. Ally has figured out that Jackson is in trouble, that he’s longing for change, afraid of himself in the bad times, trying to fill a void—the shallows.

Jackson, for all of his success and fame, needs more. He is trying to keep up a hardcore image but failing. He’s wading in the shallow end of the pool of life, not the deep end, where real adults swim.

Shallow isn’t what Jackson wants. He’s is a good guy, after all. He is kind. He makes friends. He can make a deep, loving connection with Ally—when he’s sober, at least.

Shallow isn’t what Jackson wants. He says, “Talent is everywhere but having something to say that is a whole other bag . . . there is one reason we’re supposed to be here, and it is to say something so people want to hear it.”

Shallow isn’t what Jackson wants. For example, Ally tells Jackson she’s a failure because the music industry tells me my nose is too big and she will never make it. But Jackson goes for the deep, he sees the real beauty in Ally—her authenticity, her artistry, her soul, and he nurtures all that.

Shallow isn’t what most of us want, either.

But shallow is where a lot of us—myself included—go too often.

Shallow. Shallow is the inability to align your life with what ultimately matters. It’s a kind of preoccupation with the next step, the next paycheck or promotion, the current distraction, so that you absent-mindedly never actually focus on the big picture or the meaning of life.

Shallow. It looks like choosing a career not on the basis of your great gift or driving passion, but choosing it pragmatically, for the sake of big bucks or success as Forbes or Rolling Stone measures such things.

Shallow. It looks like adopting political opinions from parents or coworkers, well, because that’s what you heard, but not taking the time to think deeply about such opinions in light of what religious leaders, or philosophers, or scientists, or cultural critics are saying about the deep.

Shallow. How many Canadians don’t choose their churches, or synagogues, or temples out of custom and superstition, for tribal or ethnic reasons, without ever giving the matter some serious thought? And how many of us hardly know or understand our own founding Biblical stories anymore, or can hardly give a coherent account of why it matters? Because, you see, faith offers consolation and hope in direct proportion to how much we invest in faith. Deep, says the Psalmist, calls to deep.

Shallow can be as simple as the latest gadget we just had to purchase for the endorphin-fueled thrill of hitting the “buy” button on Amazon; the same gadget that Marie Kondo will tell us how to get rid of to declutter. Shallow can be simple, like giving someone the finger at an intersection; or seductive, like drinking a few too many glasses of wine, over and over again.

And perhaps most difficult, most maddening, shallow can also be good. We all need some shallow. We all need time away from responsibility, fun away from the rat race, soothing if mindless pastimes that can momentarily drown our anxiety or rest our bodies. Shallow is many negative and some very good things, and we are therefore required, if we are to enjoy our shallow, to be discerning, to regulate it and box it in and plan for it so that shallow—like Jackson’s whiskey—does not conquer us and waste our lives.

In the end, Jackson Maine chooses to die by suicide. The scene is very sad, very jarring, and not knowing that it was coming, it hit both Irene and I like a ton of bricks, because, as you know, a few years ago Irene’s brother died in this exact manner. Jackson’s suicide also seemed, to us, an overly melodramatic response to the problem of living in the shallow end. It felt tacked on and I was irritated that such an emotionally charged, complex, painful reality for some of us should be tacked on. After all, *A Star Is Born* didn’t have to end this way. There are four versions of this movie out there, and not all end with suicides.

On the other hand, as much as I hated it, Jackson’s suicide also underlined that shallow—and the many ways we try to medicate ourselves, or distract ourselves against, or protect ourselves from the challenge of going deep—Jackson’s suicide was an attempt by the script writers to underline that shallowness is not nothing. Shallowness is a pretty, purring beast of prey that can ultimately tear you apart. Beware.

The movie left me with a big ache. It’s tragic. The family fights, the drugs, the alcohol, the artifice of the world of the rich and famous, the play-acting that everyone does—it’s all shown to be meaningless. Even the most precious, hopeful thing in this movie—Ally’s stick-to-it-ness when it comes to her love for her tragic husband, isn’t enough to save Jackson from the shallows.

This movie is what the writer of Ecclesiastes might have produced or directed if he made movies instead of wrote scripture. “I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun, and see, all is vanity and a chasing after the wind.” Jackson’s love, his musical wizardry, his kindness, all stuck in the swamp of shallow, in the end, all a chasing after the wind.

And—perhaps to its credit—the movie doesn’t offer any quick fixes or easy answers for those of us who struggle with shallow emptiness. By the end of the movie, not only does Ally’s sacrificial love not save Jackson, but she is herself beginning to sell out rather than sing the truth.

What can I say? There is a Biblical word worth pondering, I think—one that both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament explore at great length, a word that defies the shallows and defines deep. This word is “wisdom.”

In today’s scripture, Jesus’ brother, James, describes wisdom, almost poetically, as a path of purity, peace, gentleness, a willingness to let others get their way sometimes, a merciful life, and not hypocritical. Nothing here about what you have to believe, mind you—just stuff about how to have a life that matters like Jesus’ life did, a life that isn’t shallow.

Unfortunately, in the time that is left to me, I can’t unpack that word, “wisdom,” more compellingly than James has done here in scripture. I can’t explain wisdom, briefly, so that your life will be changed.

Wisdom, after all, like the deep, is complicated. Wisdom is elusive. Achieving wisdom is a whole-life goal; not a pastime; not merely the third, concluding point of a sermon. Wisdom is a pearl of great price that you must sell all to own.

However, this morning, I do invite you to commit to a life of writing that third point of this sermon yourself, on your own hearts. I invite you to do what only you can do for yourself, go deep to secure wisdom for your journey. And sure, along the way, carve out a bit of time to enjoy the shallows, too. But ultimately, choose deep, and pursue it. For life.