

Hang on to Your Hat; Hang on to Your Hope

March 6, 2022

Stepping Up

There are pictures that have given me goosebumps all week: The scene is the main train station in Berlin, where Ukrainian refugees have been fleeing since Russian troops invaded over a week ago. My reaction may be, in part, a result of Berliners long and complex relationship with both war and refugees, but mostly, it stems from the sheer humanity of the situation. The pictures show the train station, crammed with people holding signs indicating how many people they can house. Particularly poignant to me are the ones with stick figures indicating how many adults and how many children they have room for. Beyond language, this call to serve the most vulnerable among us takes my breath away.

I have a confession to make: I don't like people in my home. Oh, don't get me wrong, I love to host a party or have friends and family visit – visit being the operative word. But a long-term houseguest? Someone whose showering and sleep patterns will impact the rest of my household? Someone who may or may not have the same understanding of dish etiquette that we do? Someone whose introvert/extrovert ratio will inevitably result in us having to rebalance our scales? Oy!

And yet, I hope that I would be there with a sign showing an adult, a couple of kids, and a dog, because responding to the basic needs of the most vulnerable is at the core, not only of what it means to be a good Christian, but quite frankly, at the core of what it means to be a decent person.

Margaret Mead said that the first anthropological evidence of civilization were the remains of someone who had a broken femur that healed. This is evidence of civilization because in order for a broken leg to heal, others had to take care of the injured person. The crude hand lettered signs are this week's evidence of civilization.

Psalm

Christians across the world are celebrating the first Sunday of Lent today, the first Sunday of our annual season of preparation for Easter. On Wednesday, rather than engage the classical notions of repentance and conversion, I invited folks to contemplate what God can do amidst the ashes. Repentance and conversion – that is, changing our ways – is most likely an inevitable part of leaning into the new life God has in store for us. But over the years, I've found that starting with our motivation yields much more sustained results. By reminding ourselves what God can do in the parched, dry, broken, dead places in our lives, we then have the "why" to motivate our changed lives.

In your bulletins, you'll see that we printed two translations of the Psalm that Zoe read for us today. On the left is the New Revised Standard Version. This is the gold standard of scholarly translations. On the right is the version from the Message. Whereas the NRSV works to give us the formal equivalence of the original biblical texts, The Message is idiomatic, trying to give a sense or feel of the passage. We printed both translations parallel to one another today, to demonstrate how useful it can be to read them side by side, to see how one can inform the other.

A couple of highlights:

Verse One:

The NRSV reads, ***“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.”*** This is pretty straightforward.

But then in the Message we read, ***“Count yourself lucky, how happy you must be—you get a fresh start, your slate is wiped clean.”*** I don’t know about you, but reading this, less formal sentence, does feel happy. It feels more uplifting than the formality of the NRSV.

Verse Five:

In the NRSV we read, ***“Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah”*** Again, it’s understandable, but when we read it from The Message, ***“Then I let it all out; I said, ‘I’ll come clean about my transgressions to God.’ Suddenly the pressure was gone—my guilt dissolved, my sin forgiven,”*** there’s a richness and a sense that comes alive. ***“Suddenly the pressure was gone,”*** breaks open the dynamic of confession in a way that ***“you forgave the guilt of my sin”*** doesn’t express.

I draw your attention to one more section, Verse Nine:

The NRSV is translated, ***“Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you,”*** in comparison to The Message, ***“Don’t be ornery like a horse or mule that needs bit and bridle to stay on track.”*** Here, with fewer words, we get a vivid image of what a life of repentance and conversion, a life yoked to God’s ways, of transformation and growth, looks like.

The Message makes me think of walking with my dog who, while pretty well trained, will strain against his leash if he sees children or a delivery truck when we’re out for a walk. That image of straining, rather than walking together amiably, is helpful to me, as we seek to reshape our relationship with God’s ways.

Gospel

One of the reasons I’m so glad that we have people back here in the pews is that church is, at its core, a collective experience. Every time we have a New Member class, I remind folks that I know that they can find better preaching online, that we know that there are any number of opportunities to hear music that may be more to your taste, but the role that church plays is that we’re in this together. We’re doing this together. We inspire one another. We support one another.

Part of what makes the season of Lent powerful within a church community, then, is that we’re collectively acknowledging that we have faults and failings, collectively acknowledging that we have sinned, that is, that we have behaved in ways that have not led to Godly flourishing for ourselves and God’s creation. AND, we are collectively de-stigmatizing the messy work of healing, the messy work of transformation.

Do you remember a couple of years ago when I ordered caterpillar chrysalises from a science supply company at the beginning of Lent and each week talked in the Children’s Time about

what was going on as they transformed into butterflies? It was great fun, though we had to wait until a week after Easter to release them, as it is Wisconsin and therefore was cold...

One thing that those of you who didn't come up front and inspect the chrysalises may not have realized is that they're really messy. Kinda gross even. The process of transformation is rarely pretty. Just think of reorganizing around the house; you've got to make a mess first, before bringing order to the chaos.

All of this is a long way around saying that, this year, when I read today's Gospel, the passage in which Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, where my mind is drawn is how comforting it is that he, too, was tempted. How comforting it is that there was messiness and struggle as Jesus himself strove toward actualization. How comforting it is that it didn't all come easy, that he had to struggle with temptation. A lot of temptation. All at once.

I hope knowing that is helpful on your Lenten journey. I hope the fact that Jesus was tempted, and the fact that we're all admitting today that our lives can use some transformation and healing and grace, can be helpful in your own conversion.

Conclusion

I started out talking about how the pictures of Berliners welcoming Ukrainian refugees this week gave me goosebumps, because in the face of war it is a sign of civilization, of humanity. There is so much brokenness in the world, so much that breeds fear and dread. While we're welcoming people back into the pews and are even singing again in church, we've been so traumatized by the last two years of pandemic that none of us can feel certain that it will recede in the rearview mirror. The fact that I'm organizing not one, but two ecumenical prayer vigils this week – one in response to a brutal murder, and another in response to an unprovoked war – weighs heavy on our psyches and our hearts.

And each of us carries around personal baggage, relationship concerns, health troubles, mental and emotional and spiritual dis-ease. It could be easy to give up hope, but the absolute center of our faith, the absolute core of Jesus' message, is that new life is coming. That life can be different. That God has a resurrection in store, even in those places that seem to be dead.

The pictures of Germans welcoming refugees reminded me of a letter I once read from E. B. White, the beloved author of "Charlotte's Web." White was well known for his correspondence, and one day received a message from a young man who said he had lost his faith in humanity.

White replied:

As long as there is one upright man,
as long as there is one compassionate woman,
the contagion may spread and the scene is not desolate.

Hope is the thing that is left to us, in a bad time.
I shall get up Sunday morning and wind the clock,
as a contribution to order and steadfastness.

Sailors have an expression about the weather:

they say, the weather is a great bluffer.
I guess the same is true of our human society — things can look dark,
then a break shows in the clouds, and all is changed, sometimes rather suddenly.
It is quite obvious that the human race has made a queer mess of life on this planet.

But as a people we probably harbor seeds of goodness that have lain for a long time
waiting to sprout when the conditions are right.

Man's curiosity,
his relentlessness,
his inventiveness,
his ingenuity
have led him into deep trouble.

We can only hope that these same traits will enable him to claw his way out.
Hang on to your hat.
Hang on to your hope.
And wind the clock, for tomorrow is another day.

Sincerely, E. B. White

“The human race has made a queer mess of life on this planet.” I don't know if I've ever read a more succinct case for the need for the season of Lent. We've made a mess, individually, and collectively. And, where White hangs his hat on human curiosity, relentlessness, inventiveness, and ingenuity, I lift up our compassion and kindness and mercy and justice.

On Monday, whether there are three people or thirty, the young man whose life had gone off track long before it was brutally snuffed out, will be prayed for. On Wednesday, whether there are twenty people or two hundred, Green Bay will stand in silent solidarity with the people of Ukraine. And throughout this season, whether there are ten people in these pews or hundreds online, be assured that your church community is aligning with you as you and God do the messy work of transformation.

Hang on to your hat. Hang on to your hope. And wind the clock, for we're in this together.

May it be so. Amen.

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Psalm 32; Luke 4:1-13
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