

Come Back to Me

March 20, 2022

The Set Up

When I was in seminary in Chicago, I didn't have a car and therefore took public transportation everywhere. And, living on a grad student's budget, that overwhelmingly meant buses and trains.

Except, one day, my third year in the city, I splurged on a cab. I was offering a scripture reading at a friend's wedding at a church that wasn't convenient to a bus line, was dressed up, wearing heels, and so I splurged on a cab.

Shortly after I got in, the driver asked what I did. When I told him I was a graduate student studying for Christian ministry, all sorts of theological questions ensued, largely centered on the theme of our scripture readings today. At the heart of the questions was the nature of divine mercy and repentance. My cabbie thought it was unjust to imagine that God will forgive anyone anything at any time.

He kept asking, "If your God will forgive anything at any time, why be good? Why not just confess at the end and be done?"

It's a fair question. And, if the point of a life of faith is "getting into heaven," if the point is only the ultimate divine reward, maybe he's right. What Jesus is doing in the passage we read today from the Gospel of Luke and the previous two chapters is giving us a series of ways to think about redemption. He's saying, "think of it like this, or like this, or like this." It's like a slideshow.

The cascade begins early in Chapter 12. It's as if Jesus says: To what shall I compare the urgency of repentance?

- Think of it this way: Do you respect and listen to human authorities? Then how much more should you respect the One with the authority to send you to Gehenna, Jerusalem's smoldering trash dump, which in those days was a common image of condemnation.
- Or think of it this way: Once there was a rich, self-centered man blithely hoarding his possessions, but God said, "You fool! This very night your life will end! What good will all your stuff be to you then?"
- Or again: Picture yourselves as servants ready for action, with your lamps lit, keeping busy — for God could come at any time!
- Or again: Imagine you and your accuser walking to see a judge. Don't wait! Settle the dispute on your own, before you arrive at the court — lest you find yourself in prison until you've paid the last penny.

(Luke 12:5; Luke 12:16-21,29-31; Luke 12:35,43; Luke 12:57-59)

The common current flowing through the slideshow becomes clear: The time has come to change your ways! Right here, right now!" (Salt Collective Reflections, Lent 3C)

After all of these images, we get to our passage from today, where Jesus asks, “Were the people who were mowed down by Pilate while they were offering their sacrifices worse people than anyone else?” Was it their fault? Will God somehow judge them more harshly, because they didn’t make a deathbed confession?

What about the people who died when a building fell on them? Surely, God is kind and merciful, will deal with them appropriately, so making a deathbed confession isn’t the point. A life of faith is about aligning oneself with the divine, with what is good and sacred and just, not about finding a loophole in order to live like a scoundrel until the very last opportunity.

Come Back to Me

Today is the third Sunday of Lent, our yearly season set aside for repentance and conversion. And while these images from our gospel passage are meant to bring a sense of urgency, “turn back to God, NOW,” “live a life of faith, NOW,” our passage from the Prophet Isaiah is warm, embracing, even joyful. It’s not the dirge folks are often led to believe Lent is about. Isaiah 55 was written at the end of the Babylonian Exile, at the end of the decades the Israelites lived as war refugees in Babylon. It’s written as they are preparing to return from where they had been forced to flee. This passage tells us that everyone, EVERYONE, is invited to come back.

You who are thirsty, come to the waters. You who have no money, come to the feast. A deep and meaningful life with God awaits you, not because you’ve earned it, but because God loves you and values you and cherishes you.

The last four verses that I asked Karen to read for us today aren’t part of the Lectionary, but they’re tremendously powerful. They help us to understand that God puts out the invitation to mercy and compassion and healing and justice, and then it’s up to us to make the most of what God has put out there.

But don’t be mistaken, God’s goodness, God’s hope, will achieve its purpose. The image here is that, like the rain cycle, God’s ways will continue to shower down on us, until our lives of faith take root. Isn’t this a heartwarming image? God is calling everyone, no matter their means, no matter their past, to a feast of love and connection. Come, be healed, be fed, belong.

A little different from the fire and brimstone often associated with Lent, isn’t it? Rather than a season of sacrifice and penitence, our scripture readings are inviting us into a life of renewal and growth. To be sure, some things need to change – our greed and selfishness and egotism, the ways that we base our behaviors on our fears and on our brokenness, rather than on God’s ways of mutuality and healing.

I think of one of the first Personnel Committee meetings I had here at Union. Bruce Shafer was on the team at the time, and we were discussing how to set up an employee review process. Up until that meeting, for me, receiving my annual review was always an experience of dread, an experience of unworthiness. Even though I’d never gotten a bad employee review in my life, every time I went into one, feelings of shame and unworthiness would poke their way out of my psyche.

As we were discussing who to invite to give me feedback, I danced around this. I didn't come right out and say it but tried to steer things in such a way that I wouldn't be too vulnerable. And then Bruce said, with no guile at all, "Well I'm sure Bridget would take the feedback as an invitation to do even better."

As much as I have always been told that reviews and goal setting and such are about personal and professional growth, about renewal and striving and excellence, until Bruce said that, in my heart, reviews had still been about catching you, about exposing unworthiness, about failing and falling short. Bruce's framing, and his confidence in me, drew me out of my brokenness and into a substantially different way of being.

That's what Lent is supposed to be. That's what our scriptures invite us to today.

I saw a great quote a few days ago that said: "Christianity should feel like, 'My chains fell off,' not, 'I better not screw up.'" For too long, for too many of us, Lent (and a life following Jesus outside of this season, too) has been framed as, "You better not screw up," and that was never Jesus' intent.

Rachel Macy Stafford, a former special education teacher turned author, wrote last week that shame is not a motivator. She used the example of how she has come to realize that, when she's struggling emotionally, it is often exacerbated by her social media consumption. Knowing this, when she got the notification about her screen time two weeks ago, she saw a problem. She saw excessive hours being spent taking in information that wasn't helping her.

The point of the post wasn't about limiting screen time, though, the point was what she did with that number. It would have been easy to shame herself, to spiral into brokenness and negative self-talk, but she didn't, because she knows that shame is not a motivator. Shame doesn't breed transformation. Rather, she used the number associated with her screen time as a data point, as a moment of self-awareness.

She writes, "The power of 'NOW I KNOW' should not be underestimated." She "discovered the power of self-compassion a decade ago when she connected the dot between her critical ways and her child's fear of making mistakes. For a while, she berated herself for the damage she'd caused...until she realized that shame was only sabotaging her ability to make new choices in the present."

A meaningful observation of Lent isn't about shame and penitence, isn't about self-mastery, but rather about responding to God's invitation to a different way of being, an invitation to new life. You may have noticed that we're singing the hymn "Hosea/Come Back to Me" throughout Lent. Our intent is for this to be the liturgical equivalent of Top 40 Radio – that if you hear it often enough it will stick in your head, that you'll find yourself humming it or singing it or maybe even reflecting on it.

In the refrain, we sing, "Long have I waited for your coming home to me and living deeply our new life." It's a love song. From God. To you.

Conclusion

With all of the horrors that are going on in the world – war in Ukraine and Yemen and Somalia; the atrocities being perpetrated against trans people, often in the name of God; in our own country, the ways that voting rights continue to be jerry rigged to diminish the voices and, therefore, the lives of people of color – it’s important for me to point out that this invitation to a new way of being, God’s invitation into healing and growth and repentance and conversion, this invitation to have a meaningful Lent, isn’t just an individual enterprise. We don’t engage in repentance and conversion just for ourselves.

You’ve probably heard the phrase: “hurt people hurt people.” Well, the opposite is true, too: “healthy people heal people.” Joyful people bring joy to the world. People who aren’t focused on amassing more and more and more for themselves, who aren’t so afraid of being found lacking that they have to attack people whose lives look different from their own, bring the gifts of abundance. They value diversity. Sure, a Lent lived meaningfully is good for you, but it’s good for the rest of us as well.

And so, as we step into this third week of Lent, as we seek to hit our stride amidst this season, my prayer for us all is that each of us, in our own way, will accept the invitation to come back to God. May it be so. Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Isaiah 55:1-13, Luke 13:1-9
Green Bay, Wisconsin
March 20, 2022