

## Follow Me to Freedom!

When I was a boy, I would never have dreamed of celebrating Lent. Lent, after all, was one of those Catholic things, barely advanced over the level of superstition and therefore beneath the notice of a staunch Southern Baptist like myself. Maybe those Northern Baptists might be interested in such things... But as you know, my perspective has become somewhat wider since those days. I have come to appreciate many of the contributions made to our shared faith not only by our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters but by the whole range of denominations and sects and churches which form the beautiful and multi-colored garden of the Church, the disparate members of the Body of Christ. One of the things I have learned is the value of Lent, not, as I suspected when I was a child, a time to punish oneself for misdeeds past and future but rather a time to reflect on the love of God for humankind and all creation and to consider how one is reflecting that love back to God and into the community.

It seems to me that this is the core of the teaching which Pope Francis has recently offered the Church of Rome and all Christians who will give him a hearing. A post from Time Magazine on the Pope's remarks has been very present on Facebook this week: "Francis suggests that even more than candy or alcohol, we fast from indifference towards others." The linked article reports these words from Pope Francis: "If you want to change your body, perhaps alcohol and candy is the way to go. But if you want to change your heart, a harder fast is needed. This narrow road is gritty, but it isn't sterile. It will make room in ourselves to experience a love that can make us whole and set us free... when we fast from indifference, we can begin to feast on love. In fact, Lent is the perfect time to learn how to love again. Jesus—the great protagonist of this holy season—certainly showed us the way. In him, God descends all the way down to bring everyone up. In his life and his ministry, no one is excluded."

As it happens, I am making some dietary changes for the Lenten fast, changes that I needed to make anyway to reflect changes in my schedule and my medication, changes that will likely go beyond the dawning of Easter. Giving things up for Lent to bring one's life into a fuller reflection of God's will or to remember the mortification of Christ in the desert or his passion, these are no bad things as long as we also set the goal of remembering the lessons we learn far past the 40 days. Likewise, the practice of taking on extra things for Lent – extra prayer, extra acts of kindness, extra study of the Scriptures – can be very positive for us, again, if we remember to carry the lessons on into the rest of the year and our lives. But perhaps the best function for Lent, as Pope Francis observed, is to let it be the time we learn to love again, the time we remember the love of God through Jesus and how it has changed us and set us free and how we need it to continue to change us. For me, Lent is a perfect time to reset and to look for new ways to follow the path of spiritual freedom laid out for us by Jesus.

In case you hadn't figured it out already, this sense of reset, of a new beginning here at the first Sunday in Lent, is what prompted me to choose our Gathering Song, "This is a Day of New Beginnings." I like the song in part because it also touches on the very basics of our faith, part of what I intend to focus on in this Lenten restart. The hymn mentions the life and death of Jesus, the might of God, the daring of the Spirit. It reminds me of another very un-Baptist tradition that I've come to respect over the years – the communal voicing in worship of the Apostles Creed. Now, don't worry, I'm not suggesting that we abandon our historic Baptist commitment to non-creedalism. I am deeply committed to the freedom and flexibility offered by that traditional Baptist stance. But when I worship with our Catholic or Anglican or Lutheran brothers and

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sisters, I feel perfectly comfortable joining them in repeating the Apostles Creed because I do, after all, believe all of its codicils if not, perhaps, in exactly the way they do.

I bring this up this morning because the Apostles Creed is a good summary of the basics of our faith as is our Scripture for this morning. In fact, not only does this passage in I Peter touch on many of the same points affirmed in the creed, I Peter is also one of the few Biblical sources for a phrase in the creed that surprises many people. As the creed says, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth: And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary, Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead, and buried: He descended into hell...” Wait... what? “Descended into hell?” What’s that all about? Well, I’ll touch on that peculiar phrase in a few minutes but suffice it to say that for me, all of this pericope in I Peter takes us back to the most basic affirmation of all in our faith: God loves us.

It is the very core of the Good News that Jesus came to bring: God loves us. In light of that message and of his brutal death and miraculous resurrection, it was the way that Peter and the rest of Jesus’ friends, as well as Paul and generations of theologians who followed came to understand the meaning of the cross: God loves us. Listen to the proclamation of this astounding message, this upside-down good news from “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the exiles of the dispersion... Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God.” God’s loving provision for us, in order to turn our hearts to God, in order to bring us closer to Godself, was to allow a truly righteous man to die on our behalf. Because of this, we are called to wake up to the fact that no one ever need die or sacrifice to gain God’s love. God’s love is, in fact, freely given. The enormity of the event should shake us out of our drowsy acceptance of the idea that somehow we must pay God off in order to be loved. By allowing the scapegoating and killing of the one man who so fully revealed God’s nature that we say he was the Son of God, that we say that he was the incarnation of God Godself, God enables us to say, “No more. No one else must die so that we may accept God’s love.” Jesus died once for all humankind and for all creation.

The story still seizes our imaginations, baffles our understanding. We will sing the song in a few minutes: “Would he devote that sacred head for sinners such as I? Was it for crimes that I have done he groaned upon the tree? Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree!” In the death and resurrection of Jesus, we see lived out the great love of God for us for which the psalmist prayed: “Remember your compassion, Source of Wonder, and your kindness, for they have sustained the world from the beginning of time. The error of my youth and my rebellions, try to forget them. Remember me, instead, by the light of your kindness.” Jesus has brought us to God. No longer need we fear that God only remembers our mistakes and our mutinies. Jesus’ word to us, ratified when God raised him from the dead, is that God remembers us by the light of God’s kindness. Nothing in our lives separates us from God.

I mentioned that peculiar line of the Apostles Creed which finds part of its foundation in I Peter. For me, the concept that Jesus “made a proclamation to the spirits in prison” upholds the absolute nature of God’s never-failing love. “He descended into hell,” is the way the creed phrases it. The implicit message is that God never gives up on us. Even if we “in former times did not obey,” as Peter says in describing those spirits in prison, God will continue to pursue us

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with love and forgiveness. God's anointed one will even come to us in hell, if need be, to reclaim us for God. God waits patiently for as long as it takes. It doesn't matter how many or how few respond to God's love and forgiveness. Only eight at the time of Noah? That's OK, God will keep waiting.

There is a rich history in art and in medieval drama of the tradition of the harrowing of hell, the story that Jesus went and rescued from the power of Satan and the place of eternal punishment all of the souls who would accept his offer of God's forgiveness. There was even, back in 1999, a sort of parody of this story by ESPN in a commercial for SportsCenter. The idea was that the broadcasters were preparing for the collapse of civilization which many people were predicting would be brought about when computers failed at the turn of the year to Y2K. The commercial showed a sort of hellish, dimly lit studio, where the intrepid staff of ESPN sought to continue bringing sports fans their up to the minute highlights and scores. Confused and frightened staffers ran shrieking through the halls. Demonic looking athletes pounded failed computers with baseball bats. At the last moment in the commercial, sportscaster Charlie Steiner appeared, hardly a messianic figure in his thick glasses, curly grey hair and beard, and round, pudgy face. He had his necktie tied around his forehead, athlete's eyeblack smeared across his cheeks like warpaint. "Follow me," he cried. "Follow me to freedom!"

It was a silly commercial and I'm not sure that the ESPN folks meant for it to reflect the tradition of the harrowing of hell. But it helps me make the cognitive leap from a story of redemption that reflects a conception of the cosmos that was held by Peter's contemporaries to something that impacts our daily, post-modern lives. Our experience is that the world can often be so frightening and confusing that it feels like a place of punishment. We know the reality of being faced with conditions so overwhelmingly negative that, although we may appear to be calm on the outside, on the inside we are shrieking and scurrying like the frightened people in that commercial. Sometimes, we may feel that we are surrounded by troubles that are bigger than us, better armed than us, threatening us. The good news is that we don't have to rely on Charlie Steiner in "Braveheart" mode. The Holy Spirit, the Comforter, comes to us in our direst need and reminds us of the words of Jesus, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Still, Christ makes loving proclamation to the spirits in prison, to us in our extremity. As Frederick Buechner wrote, "Christ is always descending and redescending into hell." We follow him to freedom.

So, what is our response to this patient, loving word of God that keeps pursuing us even to the worst place we can imagine? Peter says it is the baptized life. He points out that baptism is not simply a removal of dirt from the body but is, as he says, "an appeal to God for a good conscience." It reminds me of that great psalm of King David, Psalm 51: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." In the modern adaptation of Psalm 25 which we used as our Call to Worship, it is an affirmation of God's love: "You are gentle and straightforward, guiding those who stray on the path— leading the humble to walk in justice, teaching the willing the holy road." In the act of baptism, we open ourselves up to God's loving guidance in our lives. We ask God to make us anew, to wipe away that which sullies us and to reset our freedom from the burdens and chains we have created for ourselves. In baptism, as the old litany says, we are buried in Christ and raised to walk in newness of life.

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But the baptized life is, of course, more than one act. It is a new way of living, walking the holy road. A couple of years ago, when Charlie Scalise and I were both on the Board of Directors of the Church Council of Greater Seattle, we were driving to a meeting one day when we passed a panhandler on an exit ramp on the highway. He was holding a sign that simply said, “Luke 3:10-14.” To our great embarrassment, neither of us knew the reference. That humbled a couple of ordained Baptists pretty quickly, I’ll tell you. When I got home, I looked it up. It’s from Luke’s account of what John the Baptist said to those who came to be baptized: “And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”” John may have ranked his baptism below that of Jesus but this is still a pretty accurate description of the ethic of the baptized life: Share what you have; Treat others fairly; don’t push for more than your fair share. And if we want a more specifically “Christian” description of the baptized life, I suggest we need look no further than the hymn we sang together a few minutes ago: “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

But surely, such a response is impossible! No one can give themselves away so completely! But Jesus did. Jesus did and Peter reminds us that our “appeal to God for a good conscience” is “through the resurrection of Jesus.” In other words, Jesus empowers us with the power of his resurrection to change our lives. And should we doubt that Jesus still has that power to give, Peter reminds us that he is the one “who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.” God has given Jesus the power of God. Indeed, we have the witness of John and Paul in the New Testament that Jesus had the power all along; that he set it aside to live among us and now has it again. In God’s great love for us, God not only offers us the freedom of new life but empowers us to accept and live into it.

Which leads me to our final response to the love of God that Jesus came and died and rose to show us: we are free from our mistakes, we are freed to new life, and we are free for joy. I’ve told you all the rest of these things today so that I could tell you this. Lent is indeed a time to remember and to reflect but it need not be a somber time. When we remember the amazing love of God for us and our opportunity to live in freedom as we respond to that love, our reaction can be, should be, must be joy. When we survey the wondrous cross, we set at naught the gains of this world, we pour contempt on all our pride but then we rejoice. “Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.” These are not words of desolation but an exclamation of joyous gratitude. In a moment, we will sing a hymn that I sang often in Baptist churches in the South but that we have seldom sung here. It’s an odd hymn, with a title that sounds like a lament. Indeed, the verses are often sung fairly slowly as they retell the story of Jesus’ crucifixion, his groans, the eclipse that accompanied his death. But the chorus, ah, that is another thing altogether. It is that exclamation of joy, of freedom: “At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light and the burden of my heart rolled away – it was there by faith I received my sight, and now I am happy all the day!” When we sing the chorus, the tempo will pick up, the music will soar, and I dare you not to smile!

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The death of Jesus is good news because of the resurrection. The death of Jesus is good news because it shows us that we are loved and need not be afraid. Lent is a time of joy as well as contemplation. My sisters and my brothers, God loves us. Let us rejoice and sing.