

Lent 4 2019

St. Brendan's Anglican Church

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*Joshua 4:19-5:12, Psalm 34, 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:11-32*

In the early pages of *Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, we encounter a coach transporting mail and passengers on a damp, foggy evening. A certain tension hangs in the air causing passengers, the coachman, and a guard to all distrust one another. In the distance, passengers hear a horseman galloping fast to meet them. The coachman cocks his gun and prepares for an encounter. The horseman calls out from the distance. He has a message for one of the passengers, Mr. Jarvis Lorry. Mr. Lorry climbs down out from the coach and walks cautiously toward the horseman.

As he reads the message, Mr. Lorry sees the words, "Recalled to life." And these three words set the whole novel in motion. Recalled to life. The renowned doctor, Alexandre Manette, has just been freed from the Bastille, a French prison where he had been abandoned many years ago. When he first leaves the prison, he is virtually lost in his own world and has forgotten his own identity. It will take the love of his daughter and the community of friends to restore his memory as he has been Recalled to Life.

I thought of these scenes as I read the texts for this week. In our stories, we meet people who have been recalled to life. The familiar prodigal son story focuses on a young man who has demanded his inheritance while cutting himself off from father and community. The story follows his descent into dehumanization where he is eventually eating and living as an animal. His freedom turns into grief, loss, and a slow death. Though he tries to return, the son cannot restore himself. In the eyes of the community he is a dead man walking. Given the chance, the community would have cursed and possibly even stoned him. But upon beholding his son a far off, the father runs to meet him, kisses him, declares, "This son was dead and is alive again."

Recalled to life.

The Old Testament story begins with an entire nation coming back to life: "The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month." In this opening image we a people coming up from the waters of death. Recalled to life.

40 years earlier, these Hebrews followed Moses and Aaron out of Egypt through the Red Sea and to Mount Sinai to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But like Dr. Alexandre Manette in the Bastille, they lost their identity in the land of Egypt. Though they were called out as priests and kings of God, this people viewed themselves as Egyptian slaves and kept feeling the tug to return home to Egypt.

You might call them and us recovering slaves: all learning to remember who God has created us to be. During their sojourn through the wilderness they struggle, they complain, they doubt, but they also learn about God's provision, God's faithfulness, God's mercy and grace.

They finally cross the Jordan river, and we see the story of the Red Sea turned backwards. When they leave Egypt, they cross the Red Sea and enter the wilderness. Now as they cross the Jordan, they are leaving the wilderness and entering the Promised Land. When they cross the Red Sea, they are running from Pharaoh and his army. Now they are walking toward the fortress of Jericho. The slaves have become a mighty force.

When they crossed the Red Sea, Moses and Aaron led the way while Pharaoh and his army follow behind and are drowned. Now Moses and Aaron are gone. They follow the Ark of the Covenant. It is a holy image of God's Presence in their midst, but it also contains the tablets with 10 commandments, Aaron's rod, and a contained of manna. All three of these are reminders of God's faithfulness to them in the midst of the wilderness.

When they cross the Jordan, they rehearse the memory of God's faithfulness even as they walk on dry ground. After coming up out of the waters of Jordan, they stack stones that mark this event of God's faithfulness to lead them through the Jordan river. Then the remembrance of God's covenant with them is cut into the flesh of the men through circumcision. Their bodies will always carry the reminder of God's faithfulness.

They rehearse the memory of God's past faithfulness and God's promise to lead them forward. As they remember who they are and who God is creating them to be, the reproach of Egypt is rolled off of them.

Recalled to life.

As we remember the unlikely children of Israel being led out of Egypt, out of slavery, out of brokenness, and toward the promise of God, I want to think of our own stories. We have also been recalled to life. If we read this story and our story through the lens of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, we might see how this new life changes our perception of the people and the world around us.

Second Corinthians is a challenging book on several levels. It appears to be fragments of two or three letters that have been assembled together. There tend to be fewer commentaries on the book because of some of the textual challenges, but I think these challenges add to the overall theme of weakness and struggle that pervades the book.

This is a book for people who feel like failures, like losers. This is a book for people who are ready to throw in the towel and give up. Paul writes of his own physical and mental weakness and struggles. Right from the opening verses he is talking about affliction and suffering.

Then Paul reveals his own personal struggles. "You see, my dear family, we don't want to keep you in the dark about the suffering we went through in Asia. The load we had to carry was far too heavy for us; it got to the point where we gave up on life itself. Yes: deep inside ourselves we received the death sentence."<sup>1</sup>

The pressures and struggles caused a sense of despair. At the point of losing all hope, Paul discovers the faithful love of God. As he continues to write, “This was to stop us relying on ourselves, and to make us rely on the God who raises the dead.” (2 Corinthians 1:9b)

This verse might help us to think about the story of being recalled to life. The death, the loss, the failure, the weakness takes us beyond ourselves, to “make us rely on the God who raises the dead. As Paul writes the people of Corinth, he is writing to a people who he loves, but who have caused him suggest pain and problems.

These people are not Jews. These are not holy people. These are people of all different races and rank. They live in a city where everyone is striving to better themselves, to build social and business networks, and to enjoy the good life as they see it.

The church community at Corinth has heard and accepted the Good News of God in Jesus Christ. They’ve experienced the power of God in their midst. Yet, they look like the competitive, striving culture all around them. Just a Christian version of it. Paul and his message of weakness is becoming an embarrassment to them. They want him to look and act more polished, more successful. But he keeps exalting his brokenness, his weakness, his suffering in Christ.

Paul, longs to see this people grow up into Christ and become the shining beacons of God’s charity in the midst of a striving culture. In spite of their striving and misunderstandings, Paul sees the very promise of God’s faithfulness. In today’s lesson, he writes,

<sup>16</sup>From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. <sup>17</sup>Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (2 Co 5:16–17)

In the striving and struggling congregation at Corinth, Paul sees the first hints of a new creation. Just as the Ark of the Covenant carried the memory of God’s faithfulness in the midst of Israel, the people of Corinth carry the memory of God’s faithfulness in their lives and their stories. In spite of their flaws, they are living signs of God’s faithful promise.

This is not just some kind of hope in the human spirit or dream that we can all just get along if we have the right knowledge. This hope is rooted in the person and story of Jesus Christ. Paul says that he regards no one according to the flesh even though he once regarded Jesus according to the flesh. What does this mean?

In the past, Paul followed his own self-righteous zeal and opposed Jesus and the people who followed Jesus. His opposition took the form of persecution and even killing.

It seems that every day of the week, I hear someone speaking or writing with the same kind of zeal. They are either defending what America has been or fighting to create what America will be. We live in a moment when it feels like everyone around us is so deeply passionate about their own righteousness and deeply angered by the unrighteousness of their opponents. Every argument feels like a mini-holy war.

Paul's own zeal was interrupted with a vision of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The glory of the Lord shines down upon him, revealing that Paul has been opposing the Lord. Paul is blinded the glory of God, so that he can begin to see again. After this encounter, Paul sees the church, the Jews, and even the Gentiles differently. The glory of Christ reshapes His vision of Torah and His image the people around him. He no longer sees them like before. In one sense, Paul has been recalled to life.

He sees glimpses of the new creation breaking in all around him. When he sees the people who oppose him or even oppose the Gospel, he does not lose hope in the promise of God's faithfulness. "Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation."

As he looks around and sees the prodigals, the enslaved, the liars, the deceivers, he sees the very people who Christ came to reconcile to God in His death on the cross. In Christ's resurrection, Paul sees the promised of new life and new creation for these people who like him have opposed God and God's people.

Now Paul regards them through Christ.

As I read and meditated upon this text, I felt challenged and convicted. How easy it is to regard other people according to the flesh, according to their imperfections, or according to their style of speaking, according to their misunderstandings (or what I perceive to be misunderstandings).

It is easy to use my own self-righteous view of the world as a standard by which to judge other people's lack of righteousness, lack of humility, lack of wisdom. I can't count the times I have been quick to judge only to be convicted for my own misperceptions. One guy I worked with once asked me about a popular Christian writer, I replied, "Oh I don't read that pop stuff."

As I walked away, I was so deeply convicted that I had to turn around, walk back, and ask if I could borrow the book to read. This later led to both of us having a rich conversation about this author. This kind of humiliation has happened so often that I try to keep my mouth shut and my heart open. But alas I fail.

It is easy to be offended by strangers and the heightened emotions in our political discourse. It is also easy to be offended with our colleagues, people we've disciplined, and or even old friends and loved ones. They can disappoint. Or we may question why God prospers them and not us. We may feel hurt by the way they've treated us or even forgotten us.

Paul has poured his life into the Corinthian church, and some of them are now questioning his authority, his wisdom, his word. Yes, they've caused him grief. By the grace of God, he is trying to think about them not according to the flesh, but according to the glory in store for them. Just think if I could look around at people who frustrate me and entrust them to the grace and mercy of God.

Then the Lord can give us burden for those very people who irritate us, offend us, or even provoke us to jealousy. He can help us to see that he created them and they are becoming glimpses of a new creation breaking in.

My prayer in this fourth week of Lent that even as we celebrate that Christ has recalled us to life and sustained us and shown us great mercy that we would no longer regard others according to the flesh but through Christ. That even as we have been and are being reconciled to Christ, we might take up the ministry of reconciliation;<sup>19</sup> that is, even as Christ God is reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and we might proclaim the message of reconciliation in word and deed.

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, N. T.. The Kingdom New Testament: A Contemporary Translation . HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.