

3 Lent C - 7 March 2010
Exodus 3:1-15; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13: 1-9
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Many have heard or read the quotation, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." 20th century American philosopher George Santayana wrote it in Volume One of his series titled *The Life of Reason: Phases of Human Progress*. Humanity's relationship with its collective past is a fascinating study all its own. And as one goes more deeply into it, one discovers, I think, that it is the study of not only history, but of the constant effort to re-write it to clean up the past. For this reason, I would add to Santayana's great insight an observation that I think is related to it. I would suggest that those who seek to escape the past are those most bound and imprisoned by it.

I read a story of a man who tried desperately to run away from his past, as fast and as far as could. Max is his name, and he is raised in wealth and privilege. Along with his mother, brother, and grandfather, Max enjoys all the many luxuries that they can afford. He eats only the best food and the best-tasting; he vacations regularly at the coast, and frequently; he is greeted as a celebrity at all the best parties.

Max's personal world is bliss for him. He is blissfully unaware that his life is very different from what many endure. Around him, many people do little more than struggle to fulfill their obligations and meet their basic needs. They show up for work at jobs that bring them no joy or satisfaction and hardly more pay than will gain them subsistence and shelter for another day. As he grows into young adult-hood, Max begins to realize that the labors of many of these people are purchasing his leisure. Max begins to find it harder and harder to enjoy the games, the parties, and the vacations. And though he does not yet know exactly how, yet he decides that somehow he will use his influence to correct what he now recognizes as serious injustices in the world around him. Max will not deny his personal history. Instead, he will examine it to learn some ways that he might create a future that is better than the past.

For most people, it is virtually unavoidable that this is what are they doing with their lives. The only question is whether or not they are conscious of doing it. And though a noble effort, it is also a thoroughly human one. Human attempts to build on the past can fail.

Full of good intentions, Max one night stops in at a convenience store. There he finds a young man of poor means being needlessly harassed by a security guard at the store. Max becomes indignant at the guard and hits him. The guard stumbles backward into shelves that are lining an aisle and falls to the floor, sadly, quite dead. Max cannot think clearly. Inwardly he is crushed with the massive contradiction. From his determination to the greatest good, he has committed the ultimate wrong.

Max runs away. He keeps running, until he arrives somewhere where no one will know him; where he believes he can now forget what has happened; where he may now write a new history for himself. And if you know his story, you may recognize this as simply an updated recollection of Moses and his troubling past.

In this morning's Old Testament Reading Moses, is living now in a land far away from Egypt, far away from the memory of his crime. He is trying to enjoy to life of a shepherd of the flocks of the father of his beloved whom he has married there. But there is something that will not leave Moses alone, even after many years away.

Moses sees the miraculous phenomenon of a bush that appears to burn but does not succumb to the flame. It is a signal to Moses of the presence of God. And from the burning bush, from within the miracle, God recalls for Moses those very things that Moses has tried to leave behind. "I have heard the cry of my people," says God. "I have see their suffering." It is exactly what Moses himself had heard and had seen long ago. It is exactly what moved Moses long ago to act, however poorly, to right the wrongs that the people were not able to make right on their own. And it recalls for Moses all the disappointment in himself that he ran away from to forget, when he learned

the brutality of which he himself was capable even when all he wanted to do was to help.

It is much what the Apostle Paul is doing in writing to the early Christians as we hear from him today. He recalls for them the history of the people of whom they themselves are now a part. Their past is a history of people who struggled to do what God called them to do, to be whom God called them to be. But theirs is a past of people who came to desire evil, as he says; who suffered and died and were destroyed, as he says, as they grew further and further from God. These things are instructive, as he says, for these new Christians in their own day. So, Paul is telling them that, whether they know it or not, they have a past. And he is telling them that their past is not something for them to ignore, nor something from which they should flee.

It's also very much what Jesus is telling his followers. It is what Jesus is telling people still today, what Jesus is telling you and me. People want to look at bad things that happen to others and find some strange sick comfort in the proposition that somehow they deserved it. They want to believe that misfortune happened to someone else because that other person or those other people somehow did wrong things, and do God punished them, or at least did not protect them.

And why do people leap to these conclusions? Why would people find comfort in the hardship or faults of others? Surely it is because they can then conclude that if things worse than are happening to themselves are happening to other people, then other people must be morally and spiritually worse than are they themselves. Jesus is speaking to people who are being judgmental. More accurately, though, he is speaking to people whose judgmental attitude is highly self-serving. Jesus' response is to tell them, and so to tell us, that they, that we, will do well to repent, that is, to turn away from this attitude.

And with the parable of tree, he takes it one step further. The farmer had planted a tree but was unable to bring it to produce fruit. So, the farmer decides to get of this reminder of wasted time and effort, this icon of failure. And one wonders if God is whispering here a warning similar to that of the philosopher Santayana, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it;"

similar to that of this humble preacher, that 'those who seek to escape the past are those most imprisoned by it.'

You have a past. I have a past. Everyone in the world around us has a past, and things in it that they would like to forget. Maybe they, maybe we, focus on the present troubles and apparent sins of others in order to assure ourselves quietly that our own past has been forgiven. Maybe we run away to other things to do, trying to escape those reminders of our wasted time and effort; trying to get rid of those icons of our past failures. In some form or fashion, it is what we do. It is what people all around us do.

And then, if we're attentive, some miracle shows up. A burning bush? Maybe not. But maybe a glowing sunrise, maybe a bright tune on the radio, maybe an unaccountable warm feeling inside. Maybe the miracle of you or me shows up for somebody else. And the miracle reminds them, and it reminds us, that no matter how big our failures, God's Love is bigger; no matter how far we run from the past, God never runs away from us.

And like the gardener in Jesus' story, I think God says to us all, 'Give yourselves a break.' God says to us, 'You can live with this, you can work with this, and you can allow me to work with it for you.' God says to us, 'You can witness my efforts working with your success, yes. But you can also experience me working with what you think are your failures; and you can witness what I am able to bring up from them.' 'More important,' says God, 'you can see what comes of them when you and I are working together. Even if we decide that the best thing is just to take it up and throw it away, then you and I will do that together, too. For those who will remember the past,' says God, 'and embrace it with me now, are assured to live in newness and fullness of life forever.'

And so may Almighty God, by whose goodness our hearts are cleansed, grant that, renewed in the spirit of our minds, and made fervent in prayer and works of mercy, we may come to those joys and blessings prepared for all who know the love of God; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and for ever. Amen.