

GOD COMES RUNNING

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As a clinical psychologist, interested in change, I am particularly fascinated by our Judeo-Christian concept of repentance. The entire bible, after the story of creation, is a history of God's attempts to call us to repentance, to reconcile with us, to enter into a new covenant. God takes heroic steps to redeem us:

brings a cataclysmic flood to wipe the slate clean
enters into a unique covenant with Abraham and Sarah
forges a special people through the exodus
sends the law and then the prophets to show the way home
and finally sends Jesus, God's only child, to teach in parables, live an exemplary life, and then die by brutal execution to seal the final covenant, removing the barriers between God and us.

And still it hasn't worked completely. It hasn't worked because through all of these attempts to reconcile there runs a common thread, one last barrier, an essential element inserted at the creation: our *choice*. It is a telling revelation of God's nature that we are created to be able to choose or reject our Creator's own will for us. The bible is a history of our refusals and rebellion, and of our own sporadic, faltering efforts to choose God in whose image we are made, to *repent*.

It was the cry of John the Baptist in the wilderness: "Repent and be baptised, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." It was, according to Matthew and Mark, the first word of Jesus' ministry: "Repent, and believe the good news,

Repent! This is the theme that stood out for me as I studied the lectionary for today - a thread that ties these strangely diverse passages together.

David is full of springtime and the exhilaration of victorious battle from behind the lines. One morning he sees a young woman bathing, from his vantage point atop the highest roof in town. Using his power, he enters into his fatal attraction with a married woman. Just this once. But then she is pregnant, and her husband has been away the whole time fighting David's war. And so, slowly, David begins to weave a tangled web of deception that ends in a heinous crime: he has her husband killed, and takes Bathsheba into his harem. As we shall hear in weeks to come, the deadly results soon follow: David's spirit is broken by the prophet Nathan and before the disaster is done, David will lose three children of his own, and very nearly his kingdom. It is the familiar, cyclic theme of the Old Testament: Blessed by God, the chosen ones fall away into sin, and sooner or later the price must be paid. It is David's story. It is Israel's story. It is our story.

But Paul tells us that the price *was* paid, not only for David's descendants, but for Gentiles, for us all. "Remember that you were separated from Christ, alienated from Israel, strangers to God's covenants, having no hope and without God in the world." -- Now *that* is *alone*! Cut off from God. Hopeless.

"But now," Paul says, "in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near" to God. Our help and our hope lie not in our own virtue, or works, or wisdom, but in God, who came to us in Christ.

God came to us!

Yet we, too, must act, and the key to that action seems to lie in that troubling word: repent! It echoes in my memory from the lips of the fiery preachers of my youth, who brought sinners weeping to their knees at the altar. It is, for many of us, an uncomfortable word. What does it mean? Yet it lies at the very heart of our faith.

To repent is - literally from Greek - to turn around, to double back, to return home. There is to me no better illustration of this than Jesus' parable of the lost child. You know the story: A son talks his father into giving him, ahead of time, his share of the family estate. This he promptly cashes in and squanders in the far country - the Hebrew equivalent of Las Vegas. It's the land of feast or famine, where nobody wants you when you're down and out. And before long the recently rich son becomes a servant to swine, the ultimate

degradation for a Jew. He comes to his senses, decides to head home in shame rather than die of starvation, and sets out on the road.

It is at this point in the story that a little detail is embedded, a detail often missed. The father, we are told, sees his child coming while he is still a long way off. Apparently the father had been watching and waiting for him, and despite the rags and squalor, recognized him in an instant. Filled with joy - and leaving behind all proper accounting practices - the father comes running, embraces and kisses his child. "Welcome home!" is all that matters. This, Jesus tells us emphatically, is what God is like.

The story is, in fact, the third of a set of three parables about that which is lost. In the first, God is a shepherd who goes to great lengths to find one lost sheep in the wilderness. God comes looking for us. By implication, we need only to cry out in order to be found. In the second story, God is a woman who stops everything to look for one lost coin. She turns her house upside down until she finds it. Then in the third story, God comes running at the distant sight of a child returning home. In all three parables there is great rejoicing, celebration when the lost is found. God seeks us out: on the treacherous terrain of the wilderness at night, in the dark and dusty corners of the house, on the road from the far country.

What the last of these parables captures best, however, is *our* role in reconciliation. The sheep and the coin are somewhat helpless and are found passively, but the prodigal son comes to his senses and heads home. I imagine Jesus struggling to find a way to teach God's search for us, coming up with one story, then another, and then this one, which perhaps captures it best.

What are the elements of our role, of repentance? The first element is a foregone conclusion: We stray away. This one we're good at. We absent-mindedly graze our way into some steep ravine, readily roll into a dark corner, eagerly slip off to the far country and squander our gifts or, like David, misuse our power. No problem there.

Next comes a moment of awakening, coming to our senses, realizing how we've gone wrong. The prodigal says, "What am I doing here? This is dumb! I don't need to be here." He doesn't begin to comprehend the grace that awaits him, but he does see his foolishness. He's on the right track.

Then comes a decision. "I will go home. To live as a slave at home is better than this!" And so he takes action, turns around, sets out on the road, takes affirmative steps.

And God comes running. What an image that is! Seeing us in the distance, the muck of the far country still on our clothing, God comes running to find us and welcomes us home again. The made-for-TV version would more likely have us pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, walk all the way home in inclement weather, get a shower and a shave somewhere, and then go knock on the door. But God comes running, embraces us in our smelly pig-stained rags, and will let nothing spoil the rejoicing at our return.

Sounds easy. In one way it is. The hard part is usually in seeing our fallen state - waking up, facing the mirror, honest confession. In a self-indulgent age, where guilt is seen as a pathological feeling to be avoided at all cost, we live in the far country. Sometimes - as it was for David and the prodigal, it takes a personal calamity to turn us around - what my alcoholic friends call "hitting bottom." But sometimes God, in mercy, doesn't wait that long. God makes housecalls.

I experienced an unwelcome awakening when, one February five years ago, I was confronted from all sides about my own slavish devotion to work, and its destructive effects. Within a space of three weeks, seven things happened to me, all apparently unrelated. I finally read Wayne Oates' book, Confessions of a Workaholic, because (I thought) of my interest in pastoral counseling. The picture sounded disturbingly familiar. A few days later my wife sat me down and told me that our life simply couldn't go on as it had, with me working day and night seven days a week, and that we had better do something fast. A letter from my mother arrived, very uncharacteristically but lovingly expressing deep concern for the extent to which I was neglecting my family, and urging me to stop and smell the roses. A friend of a former client called to say that she needed help with her serious workaholicism and that I had been very helpful to her friend in this regard. My children began cajoling me at night, "Put that down, Daddy, and come play with us!" and one night they literally drove a colleague out of the house saying, "It's night time, not work time. Leave Daddy alone!" To my shock and amazement, an old friend, whom I regard as a model of mental health and a relaxed lifestyle, called me in deep depression, having been overcome by success and compulsive working. Finally, one very courageous psychology trainee used our supervision hour to confront me with the shallowness of my own

relationships with my students. It was painfully plain to me that he spoke the truth, and that what he saw was the product of my pouring everything into my work.

Depression followed - a brokenness of spirit accompanied, not accidentally, by one of the most severe illnesses I have ever suffered, in which my body was purged of all its contents. I woke up in the pigpen, suddenly aware that I had made an idol of my work, even my church work, and had been sacrificing on its altar my marriage, my family, my friendships, my students, and my own spiritual life.

A broken spirit, a soul pierced through by the painful consciousness of its own shortcomings, is a new beginning in our search for God. The message of the gospel is that God is also searching for us. In Mark's account, Jesus and the disciples, exhausted, try to get away from it all by going by boat to a deserted place. But the crowds get there first, and Jesus, true to his teaching, is overcome by compassion for them, because they were like lost sheep without a shepherd. God does not tire of us. When we respond - turn homeward - God is there.

The rest of the journey is not all that easy, to be sure. We are not told how the prodigal was doing at 5-year follow-up. I continue to struggle to keep a healthy balance between work, relationships, and spirit. David continued to be human, and suffered much in the years that followed his repentance. Yet it was his second son by Bathsheba - Solomon - who reigned over the kingdom at its peak. God has an infinite capacity to forgive us, to heal us, and to bring resurrection out of brokenness.

But the choice is always ours. God is watching and waiting for us. It is when we stop, face up, turn around, and take a few steps homeward, that God comes running.