

Homecoming and Teshuvah
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Do you remember Michael Peter Fay? He was the 18 year old American that was charged with keying cars in Singapore in 1994. His punishment, caning, stirred an international uproar, eventually leading to the involvement of then President Clinton, seeking leniency. Eventually, the caning, four strokes, was carried out as Michael Fay, undressed, with a pad over his kidneys to protect them, was caned four times across the buttocks with an overnight soaked rattan whip.

I was teaching 5th grade at the time. I brought the topic up in social studies and to just about a student – each thought that the punishment was too strict. Then I asked the ten-year olds what if it were their brand new car that he had keyed what they would do, to just about a student they said, “Cane him!”

Intellectually, an argument is one thing. In practicality, the argument can become something quite different.

I Who might have guessed that this politically astute and rising star would become one of the most reviled figures in human history? Certainly not the quiet Basque village in Spain called Gernika-Lumo, Guernica. It was the time of the Spanish Civil War and Francisco Franco. Franco had enlisted the help of Hitler in supporting the Fascists, and Operation Rugen, the bombing of Gernika-Lumo took place on a Monday morning – with the German Luftwaffe sending wave after wave of bombers, killing nearly two thousand civilians, devastating the village, supporting the Fascists and gaining practice with their new air war machine.

The attack stirred an international outcry and prompted Picasso to paint *Guernica*, as a testament to the ruthlessness and destruction of war. It has done so ever since.

Still, I imagine, for most of us here, these are historical events, intellectual exercises in history, art, but for some – war and its devastation is a real memory and maybe a deterrent for some, although I am not sure about that.

Thinking still of Guernica, I wonder how many folks who would consider themselves pacifists would not have wanted to fight back after such an attack, were it their families and friends who were killed, their homes and businesses that were destroyed, their history and culture that was forever altered. In some ways, we probably all have a little of that fifth-grade class in us.

I wonder how many of us were challenged in similar ways following 9/11. We became a nation under attack and chose a response path that has led us again

to war, with considerable consequences. And, as good as our information systems may be in these post-modern times, it is difficult to clearly know how we got into the situation we find ourselves in today.

It brings to mind Churchill's definition of history: "One damn thing after another."

It gets even more difficult to understand history and events of ancient biblical times. It's mind-boggling to talk about life in the 7th and 8th century B.C.E., at least for me, and have any kind of intimate connection to what took place, especially considering the nature of the documents we have to use.

In this morning's reading of Isaiah, for example, we are in what is called Second Isaiah or Deutero-Isaiah. The 66 books of Isaiah are generally broken up into two sections: Isaiah – Chapters 1 – 39, and Second Isaiah Chapters 40 – 66. Some of the most wonderful poetry in all of antiquity, Deutero-Isaiah is written at the time of the fall of Babylonia to Cyrus and the Persians who gave the Jews permission to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple.

Unlike First Isaiah's prophecies of apocalypse, written during the second half of the 8th century and a time of turbulence with Assyria and other forces, this Second Prophet is celebrating and inviting everyone to the party! It is a time of liberation following 50 years of captivity as a nation, another difficult concept – and now, God had made a way for the captives to be set free and return home. Isaiah's call for repentance is really a call for a whole change in being! We know that the exiles, for the most part, were well-treated and many prospered during the time of the exile. Many who would be returning to Jerusalem would have been born during the captivity. "Repentance" really did mean turning away from what they had known for so long – to what, for many, was going to be a new and different way of living – a homecoming.

Still, there is a sense that the captivity, itself, was caused by the sins of those who eventually became captive. However, this was now a time of forgiveness. The punishment was done. Let it all be forgotten! Rejoice! Rejoice!

In these comments this morning and in the selection of readings from the lectionary, the "hinge" seems to be around the notion of punishment. The idea being that if you punish with a rattan cane or the Luftwaffe, the offending actions of individuals or groups would be ceased, if for no other reason than out of fear.

Captivity for the Jews, the punishment for their misbehavior and that of their leaders who refused to listen to the prophets – had been meted out. The message: the debt is paid; let's not make that mistake again. Or you know what might happen!

For many, though, the idea of omnipotent judgment, punishment, and reward seems uneven and even careless. For God to put a whole nation into captivity for

the sins of leaders or other groups – seems a little over the top. There are many other biblical examples of a judging, punishing, God who disciplines with a great deal of collateral damage. For me, maybe for you, that has always been hard to grasp.

Try as I might some 2800 years later, I can't help transferring some of my own understanding of God onto the God of all time and eternity. Was God so different then? Does God change over time? I never really thought so, but I don't really know, either.

I am pretty certain God is not vengeful. One of the problems, though, surfaces in a much larger conversation about theodicy - that is, if God is good – then how do such bad things happen to good people. If God, the creator of all has created us in God's image – then how can some of us be so unkind or even worse? Is it evil? And, if so, if God created all – then is God part evil?

I should say that for me, I have replaced the word “evil” in my vocabulary with “illness.” Still, does that mean that God is also sickness?

Each of us, I am sure, has felt some of this tug at us when various things happen. Just this week, a devastating and heart-wrenching fire took the lives of 10, many of them children in the Bronx. I wonder how God – the families' understanding of God - will help them survive such a loss, and then I remember how God and faith and community have helped me and others through such times.

And, generally, the questions subside. If for no other reason than I have no way to find answers. I can only rely on the faith and the God that has gotten me this far to do it again, and I ask for help.

In Luke's reading this morning, Jesus addresses this, I think.

Jesus is told of Pilate's continuing persecution of Jews in the temple. And, almost abruptly, Jesus says,

“Do you think these who were executed were worse sinners than other Galileans?”

In other words, do you think this is punishment for their sins? And, without waiting for a response, he continues

“No, no more than those upon whom the tower of Siloam fell.”

No, it is not that these events are punishment or reward, but be careful, for you don't know when something may happen, so repent: turn your life around to good, to helping others, to being faithful.

Without going any further, Jesus just about says, these are not the things for you to understand. Juxtaposed with the great commandment, he simplifies it all.

I have wondered if some of the great writers and theologians that would follow Jesus, attempted to balance this seeming disequilibrium of “bad things happening to good people” with such intensity – because the central figure of the Christian church – a very good person, had a very bad thing happen to him.

What kind of a God or parent would let such a thing happen to their Son? What did this mean for us? So, there had to be questions....

Again, I think Jesus gave us the answer and the commandments to go with it.

Take the log out of your own eye, clean up your side of the street, love God and your neighbor, turn around your life, help others to turn around theirs... and you'll be fine. Simple, well... sort of...

What is true is that we've all been through a lot and we are still here.

In fact, we are more than still here.

I remember Joe Gilmore at South Church once talking about God crying at some of the terrible things that happen. That image stirred up a reaction within me on several levels: a compassionate God, an inadequate God, a withholding God, a God that would not interfere but awaited us with peace and comfort, a God who was not removed...present in all ways...

Those images and more are still with me, as is my realization that Jesus was right – I'm out of my element in trying to figure this out. Analysis paralysis sets in at some point, and the best thing I can do is turn to another and see if there is something I can do to help them.

But here and there, I do find concepts and ideas that bring some of it together. One of them is *Teshuvah and Homecoming*.

Let me read just a bit from Arthur Green's Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology.

“Coming home is teshuvah, but in the fullest sense of that rich term. The word for “turning” or “returning” means much more than “repentance,” as it is often translated. Teshuvah is the universal process of return. All things turn toward their center, as fully and as naturally as plants grown in the direction of light, as roots grow each toward their source of water. The same universal will that is manifest in the evolution of life, ever striving toward “higher” forms of consciousness, is present in the desire of all

things to turn inward and to show that they are tied to a single source. The world that flows forth from the One seeks to return to the One.

This universal longing is marked in human consciousness by the desire to “return” to God. The human act of contrition that we call teshuvah shows this universal tendency as it is manifest in our own lives. Our desire to return home is the manifestation in the human spirit of the most universal and basic longing, one far more ancient than the individual who feels its pull or the various cultural forms in which it is seen.”

Could this have been what Jesus was talking about? Give it time. Don't cut down the fig tree yet. Don't become overwhelmed by events, for you are on your journey home, as are others? Give time time?

You will decide, but that longing toward God – that's what will continue to keep us all together... and it is strong, very strong here and among you. May it continue to be so.

Amen.