

Lent 3 (MP-2) (2020)

As with most ministers, from time to time, I get called on for counselling.

Sometimes this counselling takes place in a formal setting, in my study, let's say. At others, in a more casual venue, perhaps driving down the road in an automobile.

On more than one occasion, I have found myself saying to someone:

“Okay, you know you are on the wrong road. That’s good. Now, what are you going to do about it? In fact, you have three choices:

1. You can continue on this wrong road.
2. You can sit down, feel sorry for yourself, bemoan your fate, blame God or someone else, or
3. You can do an about turn and return to the right path.

How much good this advice does it is hard to say. Some respond to it and make a positive change; others do not.

Regardless, I plan to continue to use it, for it really is true. In many situations, ‘return’ is second only to knowing you have a problem in getting out of a mess.

For example, think about Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son. What did the young man say after ‘he came to himself’?

“I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee” (Luke 15:18).

And, he did just that, and you know how the story ends . . . with much rejoicing and a big party!

This thought of ‘going back’, of returning, is also central in our first reading this morning, taken from Zechariah.

You can be forgiven if you are foggy on your Zechariahs. After all there are a number of them in the Bible.

This one is numbered among the ‘Minor Prophets’ at the end of the Old Testament. These prophets certainly don’t get the press of the likes of Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel. Yet, not unlike their more famous counterparts, they were God’s men of the hour.

Who was Zechariah, and what was his message. . . or rather, what message did God delivered through him?

Taking these questions in order:

Zechariah was a **post-exilic prophet**, meaning he wrote in the period following the return of a remnant of God’s people from Babylon.

By the time he wrote, they had been back in their own land for 18 years. Those who returned came with high hopes of rebuilding Jerusalem and establishing a new life.

Once there, though, they faced many challenges. Some of which included:

- Lack of money;
- Hostile neighbours who resisted their work to rebuild Jerusalem; and
- Crop failures and a drought.

As a result, by the time Zechariah wrote, many had grown weary.

Despair had set in.

Work on rebuilding the Temple had slowed.

Many of the returning Jews had turned their focus from God and rebuilding His House to their own fortunes and rebuilding their own houses.

They were saying that work on God’s House could wait for better economic times.

And, to make matters worse, many felt abandoned by God and were feeling sorry for themselves.

Why was Zechariah writing?

What was his message from the Lord?

In a word, it was **Return**. “Return unto me, and I will return unto you.”

In fact, God had not moved away from them. They had moved away from God.

What was their sin?

Well, as with some of their fore-bearers, it was the sin of hypocrisy.

Commentator Barry Webb defines hypocrisy as:

Worship divorced from any serious commitment to obeying God in everyday life.

They had returned to the land God had promised them, yet they had allowed themselves to be side-tracked by discouragement and self-adorption.

Isn't that where we are in our national life?

God and His worship have been pushed farther and farther to the side.

When I was a boy, for example, Sunday was a day set aside for the Lord. You knew it was Sunday by just walking down the street.

I remember going to church one Sunday morning with my family and seeing a man out mowing his grass. It was so strange a sight that we all turned and looked at each other. You didn't do that on Sunday!

Now, it's hard to tell Sunday apart from any other day.

Of course, the malaise in which we find ourselves goes well beyond mowing your grass on Sunday. That almost seems trivial.

No, there is all sort of rot out there. Self-absorption is the order of the day. Pleasure trumps commitment to Christ and His precepts. My way, not His way is where most people are in their daily lives.

Might not the Coronavirus be God's wake-up call?

God is not the author of evil. The Scriptures tell us as much (James 1:13).

Even so, over and over again, in Scripture we find God *allowing* and using calamity for the good of those He loves.

Case in point being God allowing his chosen people to go into exile in Babylon.

God allowed the consequences of their waywardness to run its course and to reach its great climax – exile.

Why? To bring about their destruction?

No. To bring about their repentance.

Might not God be using today's crisis in the same way?

To breakdown our smugness . . . to make us realize our helplessness apart from Him . . .

. . . to cause us to turn back to Him?

We can place a man on the moon.

We can create weapons capable of destroying whole cities and perhaps the whole world.

We can, through modern technology, change the temperature in our house from a smart phone anywhere in the world.

Yet, millions are hunkering down in their houses this morning afraid to go out because of an unseen organism over which our best and brightest scientists seem to have no power.

What is God saying to us in this year of grace and sorrow 2020?

Might it not be, Return unto me, and I will return unto you?

As I prepare to close let me ask you:

In what areas of your life is God calling you to return to Him? Think about it.

What about in this country?

We put “In God we trust” on our money. But, as a nation, are we following His precepts? Are we guilty of the sin of hypocrisy?

Formed under the Gospel and called to be a light to the nations . . . are we doing that?

Or, are we exporting pornography and filth of every sort?

Are we caring for the poor?

Are we reaching out to young women who without guidance and compassion and resources might otherwise be lured into abortion mills?

Are we as Christians holding up God’s plan for the family in word and deed as a thing of beauty and grace?

Or, are we letting the world around us mould our thinking and guide our doing in this matter?

Where is our hypocrisy this morning?

In today’s Old Testament reading, we find a message of judgment and rebuke – yes -- but also one of grace and hope.

That message of grace and hope is contained in that little word ‘Return’. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, says the Lord God Almighty. ///

What will be your response today? What will be mine?

