

Ash Wednesday/Midweek 1

Return to Me!

Text: Zechariah 1:1-6

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as we begin our journey to the cross together, I want to shape our focus with a story from Jesus. The prodigal son. Recall that for whatever reason, the son took his inheritance and left. He went to a distant land and over the course of an unknown time, squandered all he had on wild living. When he had hit rock bottom longing to eat the food he was feeding pigs, he had a change of heart. He decided to return to his father and face the consequences of his actions, which he knew would be great for the way he had treated his father. But when he was still a long way off, his father was already waiting for him, to receive him back with a forgiving love that shocked not only the son who had left but his brother, and probably everyone else too.

It's a fitting story to begin our Lenten journey because it illustrates the way God looks at his wayward and wandering people. He never stops loving them. He never stops holding out hope that they will return to him. But he doesn't force them to return. He won't capture them and chain them up. He lets them wander far from home, but offers the comforting promise that when they return to him, he will return to them.

This Lent, we'll be hearing from the prophet Zechariah. Each week we'll look at one of his prophecies to see how he described Jesus' suffering and death in such vivid detail that he has been called the Holy Week Prophet.

Our text tonight is Zechariah 1:1-6:

In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo.

² The Lord was very angry with your forefathers. ³ Therefore, now you are to tell this people that this is what the Lord of Armies says to them.

Return to me, declares the Lord of Armies, and I will return to you, says the Lord of Armies. ⁴ Do not be like your forefathers, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed, "This is what the Lord of Armies says. Return, return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds."

But our forefathers did not listen, nor did they pay attention to me, declares the Lord. ⁵ Your forefathers—where are they now? And those prophets—did they go on living indefinitely? ⁶ But my words

and my statutes, which I commanded to my servants the prophets, caught up with our forefathers, didn't they?

Then they returned and said, "Because of our ways and our deeds, the Lord of Armies has done to us just as he planned to do to us."

In the opening verses of his book, Zechariah states his theme:

"Return to me," declares the Lord of Armies, "and I will return to you," says the Lord of Armies.

Why does God say that? Where had his people gone that they should now return? Zechariah's prophecies were made around 520 B.C., some 15 years *after* the exiles had returned from Babylon to the Promised Land. They were back home, living in relative peace and comfort.

God wasn't calling them to return physically but spiritually. He was calling them to repent and return to him in their hearts. Because after they came home, they became so focused on rebuilding their lives, planting their fields, rebuilding their homes, and restoring their livelihoods that they forgot about the God who had restored them to their land.

So Zechariah, whose name means "the Lord remembers," was sent to help the people remember the Lord. He began by calling them to turn from their evil ways.

The first thing they were to remember was that the Lord had been very angry with their ancestors. Literally he says, **The Lord raged against your forefathers!** He was tired of his people's repeated rebellion. They heard his warnings but refused to listen when he told them to change their ways. So he disciplined them. He took away their nice homes as they saw them burned to the ground. He took away their homeland as they were carried off to Babylon. He took away their freedom as they, the people of God, were enslaved by a heathen nation.

But now they were back in the promised land. The next generation had returned to Israel. So Zechariah used their forefathers as an example: **Your forefathers—where are they now? And those prophets—did they go on living indefinitely?** And the answer was, No. They were gone. The words and warnings of God had caught up to them. Everything that God had said would happen, did! His question was obvious: Will you learn from their history? Or will you repeat their mistakes? His warning was implied: Don't think that God's offer of grace will last forever. Just like their prophets and their words weren't around forever, so Zechariah wouldn't be around forever to keep warning against rejecting God's grace.

We've probably all done it as parents. Make an example out of one child so that the other children can learn the same lesson. Have *we* learned from children of Israel and their mistakes? Or are we repeating them? If we're honest, we too need to be called to return to the Lord because we daily sin much. We too get distracted by the cares and concerns of this life, by our jobs and our homes and our livelihoods. We can get so caught up in everyday life that we even forget about God and how much we deserve his wrath and punishment.

It may not be dramatized with slammed doors and curses under our breath, but just as any relationship, even a relationship with a parent can be strained, our relationship with God can be strained — not by him pulling away from us, but by us pulling away from him. Missing too many worship services, or lack of focus when we're here, long stretches between not just being in the Word, but applying it, not just here in God's house, but in your house, at your work, with your friends, or lacking time in prayer, or speaking help, or happiness anywhere but from him — all can widen the distance between us and our Maker.

Whether it happens through attack or apathy, a strained relationship with God is entirely our fault. We deserve to have him rage at us, slam the door, and bolt it shut forever.

But that's not how God deals with his wayward and rebellious people. The Lord remembers. The Lord—the God of free and faithful, steadfast and never-ending love—never forgets his people, never stops loving them, never stops holding out hope that they will return to him. And he doesn't force us. Amazingly, he invites us.

This is what the Lord of Armies says: “Return to me and I will return to you.”

The father of the prodigal son longed for him to come home. No doubt, if he had known his son's situation he would have sent a messenger with that exact message of love: Come home! I will welcome you with open arms. Repent, turn from your sin, turn back to me, and know that I will return to you.”

On Ash Wednesday, we set aside time to reflect: Have I been apathetic toward the Word? Has my relationship with God grown cold? Am I heeding the Lord's call to repent—to turn away from my sins in sincere sorrow and turn to my Savior?

Let's do that right now, using these questions and answers from the 1993 version of *Christian Worship*. There are similar questions in the new hymnal, but how they are worded here will serve us better tonight.

Q: What does God tell me about myself in his holy Word?

A: He says that I am a sinner and deserve only his punishment.

Q: What should I do if I am not aware of my sins or am not troubled by them?

A: I should examine myself according to the Ten Commandments and ask how well I have carried out my responsibilities as a husband or wife or single person, as a parent or child, an employer or employee, a teacher or student. Have I loved God with all my heart, gladly heard his Word, and patiently endured affliction? Have I been disobedient, proud, or unforgiving? Have I been selfish, lazy, envious, or quarrelsome? Have I lied or deceived, taken something not mine, or given anyone a bad name? Have I abused my body or permitted indecent thoughts to linger in my mind? Have I failed to do what is right and good?

Q: When I realize that I have sinned against God and deserve his punishment, what should I do?

A: I will confess before God all my sins, those which I remember as well as those of which I am unaware. I will pray to God for his mercy and forgiveness.

That's not easy, is it? Confessing sin is never fun. But you can do this self-examination often and without fear by recalling God's gracious *invitation*:

I'm sure you noticed when I read it at the start, how Zechariah emphasized that this was not *his* idea but the certain promise of God. In one short verse, he says it three times: **“This is what the Lord of Armies says: ‘Return to me,’ declares the Lord of Armies, ‘and I will return to you,’ says the Lord of Armies.**

It would be like if the Father of the prodigal son sent him a messenger saying, Your father says he loves you. Your father says return. Your father says he will receive you back. There would be no doubt as to the content of the father's heart.

The Lord—the God of free and faithful, steadfast and never-ending love—remembers *us*. He never forgets *us*, never stops loving *us*.

Even if you never stormed out of your home and needed to be reconciled to your earthly father, you have been reconciled to your heavenly Father. Because the Lord remembers, he remembered his promise to send a

Savior. That's what the season of Lent is all about: Jesus was estranged from his Father on Calvary so that you could be reconciled back to God.

Let's go back to the questions: *Q: How do I receive his gracious forgiveness?*

A: His Word assures me that Jesus led a pure and holy life for me and died on the cross for me to pay the full price for all my sins. Through faith in Jesus, I have been clothed in my Savior's perfect righteousness and holiness.

When we return to God in repentance, he returns to us with assurance. When we return to him in confession, he returns to us in absolution. You are forgiven! When we return to him and seek his favor, he returns to us with the reminder that we have had it all along—for Jesus' sake.

Yes, we may still suffer earthly consequences for our sins, but the eternal consequences of our sins — that Jesus suffered for us. For his sake we are spared the eternal punishment that our sins deserve, and we receive his forgiveness with joy.

Then, naturally, but he Spirit's power, we return to God with our lives. We give them back to him in thanks. We change our minds about what is important in life. Our everyday cares and concerns—our jobs, our homes, our livelihoods—still require attention. But our Father knows that we need them. So we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, knowing all these things will be given as well”

No matter how often you have wandered, no matter how far you have run from home, the Lord of Armies' promise remains: “Return to me . . . and I will return to you.” It's this journey to the cross that shows us just how far he was willing to go to keep that promise to you, to me, to all. Amen.