

“Coming Alive to God”

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Scripture: Genesis 21:8-21; Romans 6:1b-11

The Rev. William T. Hennessy

In Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*, the main character is driven to resurrect his childhood and youth in Afghanistan when he receives a phone call from an old family friend who offers him a chance for redemption with the words, "There is a way to be good again." But that way leads the character on a path through dark and horrifying memories and back to a relationship he had long put behind him. Redemption comes through the excruciating release of his past, his old self and embracing a new future, a re-birth.

It's a relatively new novel, but it's an old story. It's a story told over and over in human experience. Witness Hagar, cast out of her family by Abraham at Sarah's insistence. Hagar, whose only sin was to be a servant and to bear a son to Abraham. She is redeemed by letting go of those ties and embracing the future God sets before her and her son Ishmael. On the brink of death, forced to watch her son perish, Hagar gives up until God steps in and brings them life.

It is that story Paul is trying to convey to his correspondents in Rome: The story of redemption. They once lived under the power and influence of sin, but now they are redeemed through the death and resurrection of Christ. Before they were dead but now they have come alive to God in Christ.

We often think of sin as a set of behaviors, certain actions we must avoid. But for Paul sin isn't so much behavioral as it is relational. Sin is a condition, it is the state of our lives when we are cut off from relationship with God. And the only path of redemption is to die to that condition. We have to let go of our former selves. We have to enter a period of wandering and searching.

Now that's not easy to do for someone like me. I like to think that I know who I am and where I'm going. Relinquishing that control, letting myself die to my past isn't something any of us does willingly or happily. It requires an honesty about ourselves most of us work pretty hard to avoid. Much like the character in Hosseini's novel we spend very little time looking backward, allowing ourselves to enter into painful memories. We'd much rather try to mold a future than examine the past. But the sad reality is any future we might shape is already warped. As Emanuel Kant once wrote, "From the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing can be made."

We are incapable of redeeming ourselves so long as we hang onto our former selves, so long as we continue to live the delusion that we belong to ourselves. That delusion has led us to cause untold misery, much of it self-directed, but often it results in harm to others. We see in them the cause of our shortcoming or a threat to our future and we try to blot them out, to drive them away just as surely as Abraham and Sarah did to

Hagar. We become enslaved to our fear whether it's of terrorists or WMDs or poverty or failure, and we are swallowed by our sin and wrapped in death.

But there is a way to be good again. We can be redeemed; we just can't redeem ourselves. Christ calls us to let go. We didn't read this morning's gospel lesson, but in Matthew's Gospel that lesson ends with Jesus' words, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." We must relinquish our hold on ourselves and discover we are not our own. No one expresses that realization more clearly or more poetically than John Calvin in his Institutes:

We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours.

Letting go of our selves, dying to our past lives, is a daily, even hourly discipline. There's no point at which we can say we've accomplished it and are now redeemed, finished. So we are always coming alive to God, awaking to God's presence, but never fully alive or fully awake. But, while letting go never ends we do know where it begins. It begins here. Our journey into the death and resurrection of Christ begins at this table. Here is where we enter into that death and take it into ourselves. And here is where we discover the Risen Christ and enter into relationship with him once more.

So we come to this table carrying with us those past lives we are called to let go. We come with our fears and our failures, with our misdeeds and hurtful acts; we come with our longing to be redeemed, to be lifted from whatever pit into which we've fallen. We come sinners every one of us, wrapped in death. Christ invites you to let go of all of that. Christ invites you to lose your life, the life you lead now and the life you thought you could mold, to lose it all and through this new relationship with Christ to begin coming alive to God again.

Amen