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3 Lent, Year C  
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### **Time to Turn**

We continue our way through Lent, reminding ourselves of the season's purpose: a time of self-examination and repentance, prayer and fasting, self-denial and a reading more deeply God's word. Three weeks in means that there's still more time to try something new, as we shake off the spiritual cobwebs in order to experience Holy Week and Easter with a renewed sense of meaning and purpose.

Last week I spoke about our shared work in these troubling times to resist the temptation of living in constant fear and suspicion -- seeing the other as a subgroup instead of the human beings God made them. 'Respect the dignity of every human being,' is the claim of our baptismal vows. Seeing first not Muslim, foreigner or transgender, or any other marginalized group you can name, but seeing God in them. As God is in us. It is not easy to live into what Jesus left us to do - even imperfectly -- to love one another as Christ loves us.

After thinking more about that list, I would like to add another other label. Criminal. Last month I attended a lecture by the seminary professor Julie Faith Parker who has visited and taught prisoners at Sing Sing prison for many years. Sing Sing on the Hudson in New York gave rise to the expression of being sent "up the river." Dr. Parker started by asking us to think of words associated with the word 'criminal.' All of the words we offered up were negative and threatening. Next, she asked us to think of the two most important characters in the Old Testament and two in the New. For the OT, we guessed correctly: Moses and David. For the New Testament, we went with Jesus and Paul. All of them, she reminded us, criminals.

In our first reading from Exodus, we hear about burning bush encounter. Where an angel of the Lord appears to Moses out a bush that was blazing but not consumed - without question an amazing way to get his attention. God then asks him to remove his sandals, for the place you are standing is holy ground. One the first things one does when visiting a mosque is to take one's shoes upon entering. There are cultures where it is expected that visitors and family remove their shoes and leave them at the door. This notion of standing on holy ground is an opening again to see God in the world that God has created.

The burning bush and Moses: a foundational story. When we learn God's name: "I AM WHO I AM."

Moses also makes an appearance in the Epistle that reminds of us of the 40 years he wandered in the wilderness on his way to the Promised Land. Paul writes to the Corinthians: 1 Corinthians 10:1-17: I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all

drank the same spiritual drink. If we were send off our collective Spiritual Ancestry DNA sample out for testing, Moses would come back as a common ancestor.

But did you know about our little family secret? We don't read this section on Sunday mornings. Before the Exodus and the wilderness, after having been raised in Egypt, Moses went out and saw how badly the Egyptians were treating the fellow Hebrews. Then he saw an Egyptian beating one of his own kinsfolk. Moses looked around, saw no one was looking, and he killed the Egyptian and hid his body in the sand. And there it was. That same Moses who carried the Ten Commandments down from the mountain, one being 'you shall not murder,' earlier in his life did just that. Yet how many of us, when we think of Moses, think of him first as a criminal?

David, the great King David, was complicit in death of Uriah the Hittite -- all because David wanted the beautiful Bathsheba -- Uriah's wife -- for himself. New Testament: Jesus, tried and sentenced to death on the cross between two other criminals: one on his left and the other on his right. Remember this was a too much for some: messiahs don't die on crosses. The Apostle Paul, spent up more than two years in prison awaiting his sentence for stirring up unrest in Jerusalem.

These examples, pulled from the pages of the Bible, might give us pause about how we label and define others.

I spent some time in the Dover jail last Sunday afternoon preparing an inmate for his baptism. Daniel does not share my skin color. He is big yet soft-spoken. He was waiting to be sentenced for a rather long prison sentence, the details of which I did not want to know, but wanted to start "turning his life around" -- in his words. He had a lot of time on his hands and was filling it reading the Bible. He was full of questions. As we talked about faith, life, childhoods, mistakes, and the future, I filled out his baptism application like I do with anyone. Names of parents. Date of birth. Place of birth. Cincinnati. Just like me, I said. What hospital? The Christ Hospital, just like me. The course of our lives went in different directions, but I liked to imagine that in the beginning we might have been displayed for public viewing and pride from the same baby viewing room.

Lent has always been about preparing for new life at baptism. And in the Early Church it was also a time to restore those who had been separated by their notorious sins. It was a time to mark the beginning of the end of separation. To invite all in to receive the greatest news of all. That death is not the last word. That through Christ's Resurrection we too can see what new life looks like -- even in this world.

I mention this experience from jail last week because I know you cannot go there with me, security and background checks being what they are these days. But I feel that when I go, I take this community with me. It is one thing to preach on love of others -- it is one thing to listen to those sermons -- and it is another to try to put these words into practice -- to put skin on them. So, I think about Moses, David, Jesus and Paul, and then I also think about Daniel born in Cincinnati in the same hospital as me. I think about how hard it is for felons

once released after paying their debts to reenter society and simply find a job and a place to live to try to start again.

And then there is this: is there a risk in all this talk about the other, the outcast, and the lost. Is there an unintended downside? Where do the innocent fit into the picture? Those who stay out of jail, pay their taxes, play by the rules, go to church, and visit the sick and are good to their families? Does God care more about criminals than the blameless? The guilty more than the innocent? The sinners more than the saints?

What does our gospel reading say?

The first part of the reading has to do with a violent event that fell upon some Galileans – people like Jesus and his followers from Galilee to the north. They had been killed by Pontius Pilate, who we name every Sunday in the Creed, for making sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem. Their own blood was mingled and mixed with the sacrifices they were making. This would have been a horrible scene and a great outrage and sacrilege. The people who confronted Jesus wanted to know whether the people themselves were to blame – did they somehow deserve to suffer. Sounds like bad religion to me.

And then the reading mentions something terrible that happened when a tower fell and killed eighteen people. Again, were they somehow asking for it? Being at the wrong place at the wrong time? This was how God's judgement would get played out back then. Something bad happened to you or a member of your family and immediately they went to a place of fear. It must be God's judgement.

What backward thinking. That kind of reasoning could never enter into our minds, being modern, educated and Western believers? – the preacher asks sarcastically. Probably more times than we'd be proud to mention.

Hear this: this was and is the kind of thinking Jesus rejected. But he said it in a way he could for the people who were listening. He said, unless you repent – which means turning and changing – you will all die as they did not know how God truly works. Death is our common end. There is no way to avoid it. And by the way: bad things happen to innocent good people. The power of Empire will crush the innocent at times and random events will shatter lives. So: what will we do about it? Turn, change, open up and move into the future.

There will always be those who want to keep sow division – who want to pit the innocent against the guilty, those on the inside against those on the outside, so that we constantly turn against one another instead of working and living together. Let's not fall for it. It is a false choice.

God is working on us to help us make a better choice. In the end, all of this talk about how we see and treat the other, says as much about us as it does them. And that is the whole idea.

We are given ample room and space to work out this repentance and faith thing.

Jesus leaves us with a parable. A fig tree is planted in God's vineyard. When some might want to chop it down for not being very productive, the gardener steps in and says, wait. Give it more time. I'll care for it a while longer. Give it some food and drink -- nourish it and wait a bit longer for growth.

So, fig trees out there, there is still time. God is patient. A whole lot more patient than we are. Time to forgive. Time to be forgiven. Time to go deeper, be open to change, learn, love and grow.