

## ADAM &amp; THE PRODIGAL

So now I need to know if you have been “hearing” the recent sermons. Repentance means? (RETURN. Going home. Going back to God.) Now that we have some of the framework and meaning of repentance in front of us and fresh in our minds, let’s develop it a bit.

The greatest story we have, up until the coming of Jesus Christ, is the story of the Prodigal Son. Now, you are going to tell me that Jesus is the one who told us the story of the Prodigal Son, so how could that be the greatest story *before* the coming of Jesus Christ?

Good. I am glad you are listening. The better you listen, the more thoughtful and knowledgeable about the Christian Faith you become. And then the Bible and prayer and the Christian Life get more and more interesting. However, there are times to labor intensely, as over a microscope, and times to bask in the sun and just let life flow in and all around you. Today is more toward the bask-in-the-sun approach – not so much a nit-picking attention to details like I often try to get you to do. We feel Christmas most when we feel all the themes coming together. One song can be lovely and one carol can point to it all, but Christmas is more like a great spiritual symphony with full orchestra playing.

The greatest story we have up until the coming of Jesus Christ is the story of the Prodigal Son. Jesus told it, but His parable is a crystallized retelling of a theme and story that has been told again and again throughout the ages. And the reason it is so powerful is because it is everybody’s story in some way. We meet the theme again and again in folklore and fairytales. This business of “going out into the world to seek our fortune” is the core of most stories – the real ones as well as the fictional ones. Every one of you at this very moment is in some phase of that story. We are all, in one way or another, “out in the world, seeking our fortune.”

Unfortunately, if you will excuse the pun, the word “fortune” itself implies “wealth” in our society. (As in, “He made a fortune.”) But “fortune” really implies fate or destiny. The stories are about going out into the world to seek our identity, our meaning, our purpose – the plan God has designed us for. That is what we seek: ourselves, our God, and our task. (To kill the dragon, or find the fleece, or awaken sleeping beauty, or marry the prince are all still easily-translated symbols for what we all are about, or are trying to be about.)

Back to the word “unfortunate.” Have you ever *heard* it before? A thing is unfortunate if it works against the fortune, against the destiny, against God’s plan. We call many things unfortunate before we even know or understand God’s plan. And that’s very unfortunate. (Well, forgive me for the details. I never was very good at sun-bathing.)

So the quest does not always go so well. In fact, it *never* goes well, in the sense that it is never easy. Worldly success, as we all know and seldom admit, is frequently just the first big trap along the way. Being poor is another trap, and I keep wondering if the church is ever going to realize that and stop encouraging it. Do any of you remember playing the “Uncle Wiggily” board game when you were kids? You throw the dice and move your piece along the track. But the Skeezicks and other monsters and trials are waiting for an unfortunate number to come up. You see? The story is everywhere! We are out in the world, each seeking our true destiny. Along the way there are wonders and beautiful people to meet, and there are undeserved blessings and helps. There are also the pitfalls, the dead ends, the things that sidetrack us. And there are also the Skeezicks. I will not take time to enumerate or describe them; you all know very well what I am talking about.

So we have the story of this Prodigal who demands whatever share of his father’s estate he can get ahold of so that he can go out into the world to seek his fortune. We read all kinds of dire and nasty character traits into the Prodigal, but that is our projecting what *we* feel into the story. We automatically load onto the Prodigal whatever guilt we happen to be carrying. “Prodigal” does not mean evil. The young man goes through his money too fast; lots of us can identify with that, especially at this time of year. He is inexperienced. In the end, it does not go well. He is destitute, alone, hungry, hopeless, and friendless. Somehow we end up feeling that way no matter how much money, friends, and accomplishments we acquire. We can identify; we see ourselves there reflected. The soul is lost apart from God (its Creator). No matter how well we fare in the far country, the story grabs us, and we know – in some way, on some level – that it is our story too.

So all the stories of young princes and princesses going out into the world to seek their fortune also grab us. We sense, somehow, that in some secret way we are each a prince or princess. And sometimes it makes us furious, and we don’t want to be reminded. This is only

more evidence that somewhere inside we know it. If we discover our true parentage – God – we discover at the same time that we are indeed princes and princesses.

Sometimes we symbolize it the other way around. We are wooden, clumsy, naive – trying to earn and learn our way into being real persons. Pinocchio is a very thinly disguised version of the Prodigal Son. Some see a touch of Jonah, but then Jonah is also a specialized version of the Prodigal Son.

I think it's fun to see all these connections, and it sets up a powerful resonance in my own mind and heart when I realize how they all mirror my own hungers and hopes and experiences. But I'm not *just* having fun. These are also the great themes of Scripture. When I begin to see that, the resonance really hums and the light begins to break.

Who is Adam, back in the Garden of Eden, except another profound telling of the Prodigal Son? "Adam" means mankind, and Adam (you and I included) has no knowledge of good and evil until after tasting the forbidden fruit. There is no real understanding of "forbidden" until after there is knowledge of evil. That's what scares us so much about raising children, isn't it? They don't understand the repercussions behind some of the warnings we give. Lots of times, we all luck out; sometimes instead, things go very wrong. Nevertheless, eating the fruit is inevitable. Adam is kicked out of the Garden, sent to go grow up – just as each one of us is. Staying in the Garden is not a real option. We are sent out. We are intended to grow up.

Adam goes out into the world to seek his fortune, his true identity, his destiny. And he knows what some of us keep forgetting: base-stickers are "it" all over again. That's approximately where Genesis begins. That's the framework, the plot, the story of all humankind. The rest of Scripture and human history is just commentary – infinite variations on a theme – until we get to Jesus.

It is interesting to me that this same story and theme is also envisioned on a cosmic level. Who is Satan – Lucifer – if not the cosmic Prodigal Son? Satan thinks "The Old Man" is getting soft, becoming out-of-date, turning into an old fuddy-duddy. God is fooling around too much with the human creatures: granting them too much leeway; being too indulgent and forgiving; growing too patient. Satan is going to streamline the operation, get a little ruthless, clean up the act (of Creation). So Satan tries to take over. He rebels. He wants to

run things his own way. Hubris, pride: “Please, Daddy, I’d rather do it myself. I don’t need You. I can do it better without You.” And soon Satan is into his many shortcuts, the lies to cover up the mistakes, and the false promises to try and keep believable – keep people supporting and following him. It leads to greater and greater disasters, as The Old Man knew it would. (Does it sound like the Prodigal Son? Hardly a syllable has been changed.) Satan becomes ever more ruthless, driven, frantic, and power-mad. He thinks power – control over others – will make it possible for him to accomplish his goals. But Satan cannot see that he himself is wrong – that his way is wrong. He only sees that he cannot get enough cooperation. He will show us all yet – and show God – that he can do it better than God himself. How terribly and frighteningly familiar! (And some of you don’t believe Satan exists? Where do you think the mayhem comes from?!)

From a hint in the book of Job, some traditions in Christendom consider Lucifer to be not just the fallen archangel. Lucifer is seen as one of the Sons of God, the Divine Prodigal – the brother of Jesus the Christ. Some second- and third-century Christians believed that the statement about “He descended into Hell” (from the Apostles’ Creed) was about Jesus going one more time to try to win over and convert his brother (and to free his victims, in any case). So even in Hell, talking to his Prodigal Brother, Jesus’ message is REPENT – come back home. All of this gets quickly beyond the scope of this sermon. My only purpose in bringing it up is to show the theme of the Prodigal Son, and how it is the major foundation for understanding everything, everywhere we turn.

So we are all out seeking our fortune – trying to grow up. We did not all come from perfect homes, but they nurtured and cared for us well enough for us to survive. We all long, at times, for the security and care they represent, however much we may have idealized it. (I personally had a wonderful home.) One thing that seems perfectly clear to most of us is that “we can’t go back” – not in the real world. At Christmas we often pretend it for a little while, and it’s wonderful. But January is always right around the corner.

I remember browsing in a library some years ago. I was just walking along the shelves looking, picking up a book here and there, waiting for some book to choose me. I had no particular agenda that day. Then I saw a book with the title *You Can’t Go Home Again*. I was riveted. The realization that it was true – terribly and finally true – swept over me like a wave. I never touched the book; didn’t have to.

I already knew. I just had not let myself know that I knew. And I stood there and wept. The loss of home, even if you have not had a very good one, is one of the greatest losses in life.

Of course, if you had asked me, I would have told you I didn't really want to go home. So why was I weeping? I was not thinking about *that* home. I was thinking about another HOME – one I hardly know about and cannot ever quite remember. *That* is the HOME my soul longs for.

We can't get back into the Garden. Cherubim guard the way. We can't go home again. We just keep going on – we keep seeking our fortune. We establish our homes here, for a while, and they get built in to our seeking. Then they change, and people grow up or grow old or separate or move away. And sometimes the wandering, the loneliness, the turmoil, the struggle, the aimlessness of it all gets to be just too heavy ... until "*unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.*" (Isaiah 9:6)

*"When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons [princes and princesses]. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir."* (Galatians 4:4-7)  
Your true identity is revealed, and you discover yourself rich and blessed and loved and important – at last.

You see? You *can* go home again – to the real HOME. That is what Christmas is about. Jesus comes to invite us to REPENT: to return, to go home, to go back to God. Jesus is mightier than the Cherubim who guard the gates. Not many things in Heaven or on earth are mightier than the Cherubim! Only this time we do not go home mindless or unaware or without understanding. This time we go because we choose it, acknowledge it, and want it – and humbly believe and request and receive it.

The fullness of the invitation is not realizable in this realm. But strangely and beautifully, a great deal of the invitation is instantly and immediately available. We can repent now. We do not need to wait. The essence of Advent is REPENTANCE. Jesus comes with the brand-new, incredible news and information and power to assure us that we *can* go home again. That is the meaning of Christmas. That is what all the excitement is about, though the celebrations sometimes obscure it.

And repentance means what? RETURN. Return home. Return to God. Now, most of you know the answer, but some folk might ask: “If that is the meaning and that is the magic, then in this new light, *how* do we repent – *how* do we RETURN?” Well, we do have have one more Sunday in Advent. Maybe that would be a good thing to talk about.