

24 March 2019  
Lent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Bringing Us Home”

Text: Luke 13:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

As a father, I want to teach my children. I want to teach them the difference between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, good and evil. I want to teach them by my own mistakes, and with the wisdom gained by what I have gone through. I want to protect them from the mistakes I made, and help them not make the same mistakes. And if you are a parent, I know it is the same for you.

But children don't always listen. I didn't always, when my parents tried to do this for me, and so it goes. Each generation, it seems, has to learn for themselves. That's hard for parents, and hard for their children. It comes from our sinful nature, which always curves us in on ourselves. And in this case in this way: I know what's best. I listen to me first. And only when that doesn't work, when I need help, then . . .

Well, our heavenly Father wants to teach His children, too. He wants to teach us to know the difference between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, good and evil. He makes no mistakes, but has recorded for us in Scripture the mistakes His children made in the past. Old Testament Israel, and the people in Jesus' day, too. He wants to warn us against making the same mistakes; to protect us from that danger.

But children don't always listen. We don't always listen. Yes, God said this, but . . . and we listen to ourselves, not Him. And we go our own way, not His way.

And so it was with Old Testament Israel. They were in a bad way in Egypt. Slavery had pushed them to the limit and then pushed them some more. They were forced to throw their newborn baby boys into the Nile River. They spent every day under death as their reality, seeing it, feeling it, living in the midst of it. Friendless, hopeless, they thought.

But in reality they were neither friendless nor hopeless. This, too, the Lord would teach us. That our Father hears. The Lord heard their cry. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob heard their cry. For He was their Father. They always had His ear, even when they didn't want it. So the Lord heard their cry. And He gave them Moses to deliver them. Maybe not what they were hoping for or expecting, but exactly right. Not because of Moses himself, but because in Moses' hand was the Lord's staff, and in Moses' mouth

was the Lord's Word. And that was more than enough.

Then after sending Moses, through Moses, God sent ten plagues. Then God sent a destroying angel that left every Egyptian household weeping over the death of their first born son, giving them a little taste of the sting of death Israel had felt for so long. Then Israel was free to go. But their Father didn't stop, but now led them. Through the desert, through the Red Sea. God provided for them. Manna from heaven, water from a rock. All that they needed, God provided. And more.

Yet what did God get in return? These redeemed, freed, well-fed, well-taken-care-of-people complained. A little adversity, a little hardship, and they were ready to hightail it back to Egypt. And when they weren't complaining they were going after other gods or having fun with the nearby pagan women. They found fault with Moses and Aaron . . . and God . . . if everything didn't go their way, and when they wanted, and according to their liking.

In short, you could take the Israelites out of Egypt, but you couldn't take the Egypt out of the Israelites.

So all this, Paul tells us today, was written for us. That with these words our Father is teaching us, that we might learn and not make the same mistakes and do the same things. *But do we listen? Do we pay attention?* Or . . . do we complain when the littlest problems arise? Do we want to go back to our own sinful Egypts? Do we forget all the Lord has done for us and given to us? Do we want everything to go our way, they way we want, and according to our own liking? And do we realize that if they did, what a predicament we'd be in? For our ways only trap us in sin and death, unable to free ourselves from sin's slavery and satan's hungry jaws.

That's the road Israel was on. So God, in love, disciplined His children. Plagues and serpents He sent, but they deserved far worse than that. *And what about you?* Do you think God now just winks at your sins? That He chuckles at your rebellion? That He laughs off your stubborn, unrepentant ways?

All this, Paul tells us today, was written for us. And so maybe we ought to listen to our Father. Maybe His Word is helpful and true after all. Maybe we should be thankful for the plagues and serpents in our lives, the troubles and hardships sent to help us. For we deserve far worse.

Jesus said the same thing to the people of His day. You think bad things happen to bad people, and really bad things happen to really bad people? And so if this hasn't happened to you . . . Don't give yourself so much credit. Listen. And repent. Don't rely on yourself or your own goodness to help you or save you. In the wilderness of this world, we need the bread of God, the water of God, the protecting cloud of God, or we are lost. Or we

will get the far worse that we deserve.

But despite all the complaining and rebellion, you have a loving Father. STILL. Amazing, no? That still, after all this, after all the years, after all that we do, we still have a loving Father. And that to rescue us from the Pharaoh not of Egypt, but of hell, he didn't send another Moses, He sent infinitely better than that - He sent His Son. And the plagues of our sin fell upon Him. And the bites of the serpent were given to Him. And the far worse that we deserve - the full wrath of God against our rebellion and sin, and our condemnation, was given to Him on the cross. And the jaws of death clamped down tight on Him.

And so a sandy grave is not your end. Nor a rocky one. Israel's great deliverance is a picture, a foreshadowing, of your greater deliverance. The life your Father had for Israel is the life He has for you. You have been ransomed by the blood of the Passover Lamb of God. You have passed through the water of your baptism. Instead of manna and quail, into your mouth is placed the Body and Blood of God's Son. He is the rock which was struck and from which pours forth all that you need for life. From Him you are washed, you have drink, and you have life. Because the rocky grave was not His end either. That tomb is empty.

Now, you can turn from all that and go back to Egypt. Sadly, some do. But your Father sent Luke, and He sent Paul, and He sent His Spirit, to write this for you, to teach you, so that you won't. But that when your sin weighs heavy on you, when temptations pull you hard, when the wilderness of this life seems vast and endless, when sadness seems to be your daily bread and tears your daily drink, when you seem friendless and hopeless - you hear of the love of Your Father and turn to Him in repentance and in faith. For His love for you is never 50% or even 99%, but as it was even for rebellious, stubborn, stiff-necked Israel, always 100% for you.

The world, under the spell of satan, will try to convince you otherwise. That your heavenly Father isn't so good, just as earthly fathers aren't so good and often fail. So turn away from God to this pleasure or that, to this better teaching or that, to this way or that. But none of those things satan offers will give you what you need. But Christ does. He already has. And He won't stop. For take a lesson here from Israel too - if God would even forgive them for all they did and how often they did it, He will for you as well. His forgiveness and love are that big. His cross and atonement are that big. Bigger than any of your sin and all your sins.

Jesus added a parable to this in the Holy Gospel we heard today, of what He is doing, with an unfruitful tree - or perhaps we could call it a complaining tree, a rebellious tree. Don't chop it down, He says. Don't give up on it. Let me dig around it and manure it, and in other places in the Scripture we are told He is pruning it too. Caring, loving, helping, coaxing, providing . . . though the digging might hurt a bit, the manure stink a bit, and the

pruning be scary a bit. But it is good. And for your good. Learn from Israel and from the Scriptures, and believe. Egypt does not have what you need. Only your Father does.

So what is this fruit that our Lord, then, is working in us? Well, that we would listen to Him, to His Word, and to the father and mother He gave to us. That we would cast our newborns not into the Nile, but into the font, where they get not death but life. That we come and bring our children to the altar, to the bread far greater than manna and blood that washes us inside and out. That repentance be to us as normal as breath, and forgiveness always be on the tip of our tongues. And what we breathe and what we speak will then be also the way we live. And so receiving His gifts, we be His gifts to others. Rooting out, driving out, loving out the Egypt still in us. That only He remain.

In the Ten Commandments God gave to Israel through Moses, He said: *I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God . . .* He doesn't want to share you with Egypt. He's bringing you out from there. It's going to be bumpy on the way. You're going to get wet. There's going to be times of drought and trouble. But manna, too. And water from a most unexpected place. Your Father wants you to know that through it all, His love is always there for you. In the wilderness, on the cross, and here. To bring you home.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

*(Some of the thoughts and phrases in this sermon from a sermon by Chad Bird in Christ Crucified: Lutheran Sermons, p. 170-171.)*