

Proclaiming the Sweet Swap's Gift of *Metanoia*

How preaching can serve the church's continual practice of shedding the false stories in and by which we live, and inhabiting Christ's story instead.

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Most people whose vocation includes a rhythm of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ have a reasonably clear sense of what that work requires of them and what they trust the Holy Spirit to accomplish through the words they will speak. One tired, old cliché says a preacher's job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Few seem to remember that this language first arose to describe the work of journalists and newspapers.¹ Lutheran preachers learn that their task consists of proclaiming law and gospel, and doing so in a way that does not, even inadvertently, confuse the two, so that law gets urged on folks as the good news or the gospel sounds somehow like a list of obligations.

Proclaimers who embrace the work and theological discourse of the Crossings community generally describe the preaching of law as the work of both undergoing and speaking about how God diagnoses the brokenness, lies, and unbelief of our human condition. Then, having lanced the boil, so to speak, and at last recognizing the truth that we have landed in a toxic abyss, we hear the prognosis. Good news and hope begin with finding ourselves, even there, in the company of the crucified one—Jesus Christ. There, in the darkness, Jesus says what he always says, now using the vocal cords and lips of preachers from among the baptismally crucified and resurrected, “The reign of God has come near. Repent and believe the gospel. Come with me, and live.” In the lingo of Crossings community preachers, it's called “the sweet swap.” Jesus Christ gets our dying and death; we get his life.

For most of Christianity's history, the church presented this exchange as primarily, if not exclusively, having to do with one's afterlife and eternal fate. “Jesus died for your sins, so come with us (and do what we say) and you'll go to ‘heaven’ when you die. Otherwise, you'll end up burning in hell forever—or at least spend a few millennia in purgatory. Jesus gave us the keys to the pearly gates. Only we can save you.”

For a host of reasons, most people today no longer believe in hell or fear going to some awful “place” like Dante described. Hence, people don't see or experience a need for the church and what it sells. This likely accounts for at least some of the empty pews and dwindling coffers in churches around the world these days. It also explains what has happened to the content of preaching in much of Christianity over the last few decades. If we can't scare the hell out of people, what do we talk about? To be relevant, some preach pop-psychology, tolerance, niceness, and the urgency of caring for the environment. Others preach thinly veiled politics and culture war ideology. They urge the faithful to demand justice and work to establish God's kingdom in the here and now, but given our polarized context these days, we see and hear radically different visions of justice and God's kingdom. Predictably, the devils in one side's visions are the saints in those on the other.

¹ <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2014/today-in-media-history-mr-dooley-the-job-of-the-newspaper-is-to-comfort-the-afflicted-and-afflict-the-comfortable/#:~:text=Dooley's%20famous%20journalism%20quote%20is,and%20critical%20of%20the%20press.>

A basic question hovers over the church catholic and anyone charged with preaching the gospel: What exactly is the point of being a Christian? If it's not about being right (while others are clearly wrong) and thus securing the correct ticket to the preferable afterlife, why bother? And if Christianity is little more than one more combative PAC or lobbying group, who needs it? Why persist in believing and talking about Jesus Christ, or hanging out with others who believe similarly? In Lutheran terms, we might ask why we continue to belabor the discourse of law and gospel, diagnosis and prognosis.

For starters, we find useful clues in Jesus' talk about how easily we can waste our lives. In the New Testament gospels, Jesus talks plenty, especially in Matthew, about the way taking the wrong fork in the road leads to outer darkness, scorching thirst, weeping, and gnashing of teeth. A couple times he mentions Hades, the Greek underworld, as a potential destination. More often, however, he speaks metaphorically of lives that end up in Gehenna, the smoldering landfill outside the city of Jerusalem. Thus Jesus intimates that even if there's no place called hell where devils with pitchforks taunt the eternally damned, it's very easy to waste the one life a person gets as flesh and blood on this earth, to spend it on emptiness and folly, toss it into the dump. And there are no do-overs, so this tragedy has eternal consequences.

That said, Jesus spent his own life hanging around the landfill, which had outposts wherever he went, saying to those who had landed there but could still hear, "The reign of God is near, not far at all from Gehenna. Repent, believe the good news. Come with me. Together we will live—truly live." That, too—repenting, coming along, living that life—also has eternal significance.

The New Testament's word for repentance is *metanoia*. Every student of *Koine* Greek knows that *metanoia* means a radical change of mind or heart. It's an attempt to render the Bible's older, Hebrew words. One is *shuv*—Turn around! Come home! Another is *niham*, which means to have compassion, but also to be sorry for what one has caused or what has transpired among us. Together, this family of words and the preaching that has urged these measures on people has left listeners with instructions to think differently, feel differently, admit fault, or experience regret. Ultimately, however, unless there's an accompanying story of some kind that allows one to view repentance happening in actual and specific circumstances and behaviors, these expressions leave us with little more than pious, vague abstractions. Happily, we all know such stories. Think of David after hearing Nathan's parable about the poor man's ewe lamb (2 Samuel 11), or the resolve that forms in the mind of the wastrel son as he eats pig slop in the far country (Luke 15).

In the field of psychotherapy, *metanoia* commonly means the work of shedding a false story by which one has scripted or directed one's life, and this is a step toward finding and adopting a new and healthier story. (Parents, teachers, and peers told me I was stupid, incompetent, worthless. I believed them and have lived accordingly. But it ain't necessarily so. Forget all that. Take up your pity-pallet and walk!) In many preachers' circles today, it's fashionable, and for good reason, to bash psychotherapy as the goal of preaching. However, preaching toward the goal of *metanoia* understood as shedding a false story and finding or receiving a new, life-giving story that leads one away from Gehenna and toward Jerusalem on the cross-bearing road with Jesus is not psychotherapy, or at least not merely psychotherapy. It's a way to preach and practice living in real life the "sweet swap" of our redemption. Jesus takes our false, empty story; we get—and live—his story as God's beloved.

Few have written more insightfully about false stories by which individuals, communities, and even nations understand and direct their lives than William Kittredge in a book titled *Taking Care: Thoughts on Storytelling and Belief* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1999). Kittredge, born in Portland, Oregon, in 1932, eventually taught writing at the University of Montana for 30 years, but he grew up the heir to a 33-square-mile cattle ranch southeast of Eugene, Oregon, and took a degree in agriculture at Oregon State University. He had every intention of living out his family's story. They understood themselves as independent, self-reliant westerners devoted to taming the wild land which their forebears had wrested from the benighted, inefficient, indigenous peoples who had no interest in improving it or making it productive. They built dams, developed irrigation systems, killed weeds with pesticides and coyotes with poison and bullets. Like so many who go to college, however, Kittredge found himself fascinated with unfamiliar literature and new questions about history and life. When he left school and his turn came to lead the next stage of his family's ranching enterprise, he soon realized his people had not so much tamed the land as ruined it. In the process, they had disrupted countless lives, human and otherwise. Their seemingly noble mission was malignant, not merely vain.

He left it all behind, joined the army, gained admission to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, survived numerous personal and family crises, and started a teaching and writing career that gave him space to think and learn about life, faith, and what it means to be human. He writes mostly about "westerners" in the United States and the stories by which they live, but his insights have the ring of universal application. This excerpt expresses some of Kittredge's hard-earned wisdom:

Mythologies and community stories shape societies. A mythology is a story that contains implicit instructions from a society to its members, telling them what is valuable and how to conduct themselves if they are to preserve the things they cherish.

The poet C.K. Williams once came to Missoula and spoke of "narrative dysfunction," as a prime part of mental illness in our time. Many of us, he said, lose track of the story of ourselves, which tells us who we are supposed to be and how we are supposed to act. It doesn't just happen to people, it happens to entire societies (for instance, in the United States during the Vietnam War). Stories are places to inhabit, inside the imagination (and places are understood in terms of stories). We all know a lot of stories and we're in trouble when we don't know which one is ours. Or when the one we inhabit doesn't work anymore, and we stick with it anyway.

We live in stories. What we are is stories. We do things because of what is called character, and our character is formed by the stories we learn to live in. Late in the night we listen to our own breathing in the dark, and rework our stories, and we do it again the next morning, and all day long, before the looking glass of ourselves, reinventing our purposes. Without storytelling it's hard to recognize ultimate reasons why one action is more essential than another.

Aristotle talks of "recognitions," which can be thought of as moments of insight or flashes of understanding in which we see through to coherencies in the world. We are all continually seeking such experiences. It's the most commonplace thing human beings do after breathing. We are like detectives, each trying to define what we take to be the right life. It is the primary, most incessant business of our lives.

And a few pages later . . .

We need to inhabit stories that will encourage us toward acts of the imagination, which in turn will drive us to the arts of empathy, for each other and the world. We need stories that will encourage us to understand we are part of everything, that the world exists under our skins, and that destroying it is a way of killing ourselves. We need stories that will drive us to care for one another, all the creatures, stories that will drive us to take action. We need stories that will tell us what kind of action to take.

We need stories that tell us reasons why compassion and the humane treatment of our fellows is more important—and interesting—than feathering our own nests as we go on accumulating property and power. Our lilacs bloom, and buzz with honeybees and hummingbirds. We can still find ways to live in some approximation of home-child heaven.

But there is no single story that names paradise. There never will be. Our stories have to be constantly reworked, reseen.²

Kittredge clearly writes from a secular perspective, and he does not, at least in this work, offer stories in which we can live lives that aren't bound for the Gehenna of his father's and grandfather's ruined ranchland and the environmental disaster his family's seemingly noble myth and vision enabled. Translated into the theological categories of the law's diagnosis and the gospel's prognosis, however, he aptly describes the cunning deceitfulness and deadliness of the false narratives we craft for ourselves. In our stories, we are always the good guys. We blame all that's wrong with the world on others, and the few faults we see in ourselves are little more than occasional excesses to which those others pushed us with their wrongheadedness. (Look what you made me do!)

While Kittredge doesn't mention *metanoia* or how it comes about, his own story reveals when it happens, and what it must entail if it's to open a way to new life. It happens when our story, indeed our entire working theology, the one in which we're in control, or at least sit as the Almighty's copilot, falls apart. We land in Gehenna. Or to paraphrase other biblical language, we find ourselves dead in trespasses, sins, and awash in putrid piles of poppycock we convinced ourselves believe.

At this point, Kittredge asserts, we must find a new story in which to live. *Metanoia* of the sort that Jesus preaches, however, isn't something we find. It finds us. It's a gift. It begins with the news that we are not alone in the wasteland of Gehenna and God-forsakenness. He is with us—Jesus, the preacher, the crucified one, damned and dead as we are. And precisely here, he says “Come with me. Come live my story. Come, be my body, my flesh and blood, risen from the grave and on the loose in the world. Oh, we're on our way to Jerusalem, sure enough, and they're waiting for us there with nails and cross-beams, but along the way we have lepers to kiss, demoniacs that simply need sitting with, hungry people with whom to share our manna, broken people to heal with kindness.”

In fact, oddly enough, we are headed straight for Gehenna, but this time together. Jesus promised that the gate-keepers there can't keep us out. Along with Jesus, crucified in the flesh but alive in the Spirit, we break in to preach to the spirits in prison, the ones who persisted in their own futile, damned story and thus didn't make the boat (1 Peter 3:17-22).

² *Taking Care*, pp. 52-53, 77-79, *passim*.

What do we preach? *Metanoia*. Turn around. Let go. Let your old story die—and you with it, for that matter, and come with us as we follow Jesus to Jerusalem.

Perhaps some assurance of orthodoxy is appropriate here. This way of understanding the sweet swap and its gift of *metanoia* honors the death of Christ as fully necessary and sufficient for our salvation, and it comforts penitent hearts. There is no new life and no new story except for Christ's death in our wretched, mucked up place. And there is no new story and no new life except we die with him, as most of us do in the waters of baptism, but only because we can't do it in the same way that guy next to Jesus in Luke's passion narrative managed. And it's pure comfort for a broken, penitent heart when our old, once-glittering story proves deadly and we have nothing whatsoever to offer, that he says to us precisely then and there, "Come with me. My life is yours."

In case it's not yet clear, all this is also talk of "salvation by faith." Faith is trust in a promise. Jesus says, "Come with me and we'll live," and assisted by faithful bystanders who strip off our stinking grave-clothes, we do just that. We come along, believing, giving our hearts to this last resort, our hell-mate inviting us on a journey only he fully understands.

To be clear, it's also a gift, this faith and our following. Experience will teach us over and over that we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus and his promise. Every day we will doubt, fall, give up, long to go back to our old vision and story, sick as it was. (It's so easy to forget how thoroughly bondage once hurt and demeaned us.) But the Holy Spirit never quits calling, gathering us in, keeping us close, helping us see the sweetness and beauty of kissing those lepers and singing with people who once lived in tombs and howled at the moon. The consistency of both our failing and unbelief as well as the Spirit's consistently faithful calling teaches us that the life of a Christian community is a matter of daily practice, daily dying and rising, daily reliance on one another for consolation and encouragement, daily *metanoia*.

It's not hard to see why countless generations of preachers have discovered that funerals prove the occasions when it's easiest to preach pure, comforting gospel. In the face of death, surrounded by Gehenna's smoldering ashes, we can tell the story of how Jesus lived the life of our now-deceased loved one, knew his or her pain and sorrow and doubt and fear, and also how he or she also got to live Christ's life among us and became embodiment of gospel in our midst.

Every other occasion for preaching, usually thanks to the lectionary for the day, offers preachers the metaphors, imagery, and other raw materials for diagnosing some false story that most or all of us present have lived out, probably quite recently. In the same lessons, or at least nearby, there will also be glimpses of prognosis, the gift of the new story, Christ's story, which we'll find if we remember to look for *metanoia*, the entry and invitation to the new story, in the darkness where we find ourselves nailed to the ruins of our old story and its lies. Sometimes we're in some wilderness where we think God can't be. Or we're on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and come upon a be-ditched, half-dead person whose very presence creates an awful dilemma. Or we're trapped with Jesus in the grip of some screaming mother with a sick child for whom we'd hardly have time even if she wasn't one of *those* people.

No matter where we go, our old stories fail. We get nailed. And every time, in each such place, he says, "Now, friend, come with me . . ."