

Providence Presbyterian Church

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Acts 3: 11-26 - "What Has This to do With Me?"

I grew up in Western NY, in a small town in the hills of the Finger Lakes. We lived on a dirt road for many years. About five cars went up that road each day, and you would stop what you were doing to see who it was every time. My grandparents lived about two hours away, but that was considered a huge distance and we made the trip just a couple times a year. I went to community college first, and then to Houghton, a convenient hour and a half from home. Rarely, if ever, had I gone more than an hour and a half or two hours from home. My life was lived in those wooded hills. My dad watched the news every night, but all those events seemed so disconnected from my everyday life. They were foreign and at a remove. I remember watching the videos of Rodney King being beaten and the ensuing LA riots on the TV, but it was a world apart, foreign and strange, and one I did not ever worry about running into.

We were isolated and disconnected from all that. And yet, I was taught at our local church that when we read our Bible and heard the Word preached on Sunday morning, those distant events of a different land and ancient time were not separate at all. It was about us. These events implicated me and called for my response. Time and space collapsed. As Peter says at the end of our Acts reading: "You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, 'And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'"

We were heirs to the promises of scripture, I was told. But we were also heirs of sin. Adam and Eve were not unique. I was Adam; you are Eve. Cain and Abel were not isolated figures either but types for all that is violent and prone towards rebellion in God's good creation. We were one with Israel, who grumbled in the wilderness, who did not trust God's leading but chose idols instead. We are among those that would not listen, would not heed the teachings of the Christ who wept over the city of Jerusalem, saying, oh that I could gather them, like a hen over her brood.

Peter makes this conflation of time and space explicit in the book of Acts. Peter does not pull back. He is not afraid to tell his audience what they are responsible for. He is not afraid to implicate them in Christ's story even though they may have been a world away at that time.

Actually, Peter makes many modern interpreters quite uncomfortable. The reason is that he assesses blame and culpability; he accuses the Jews of killing the messiah. It has been such assessments that have fueled anti-Semitism and other movements of hate. It is that move to blame a particular people group or race that rightfully invokes an uncomfortable response. It is an impulse all too prevalent and a lure all too inviting—to blame others for society's ills. In fact, to read how Hitler leveraged the writings of Martin Luther as Luther wrote out of his frustration with and condemnation of the Jews; it is enough to make one shutter.

The problem is that Peter points the finger and says “you,” or so it seems. We may forget, however, that Peter was more of an insider in his accusations than accusing another people group. He was Jewish and did not consider himself non-Jewish. He was implicating his brothers and sisters in the Jewish faith. But he does make a problematic, while important, move.

While problematic, it is an essential move, in fact, if these events regarding the Christ, regarding Jesus' death and resurrection, are to have any importance and any meaning at all. Without Peter's interpretive move, they are just isolated historical events that relate only to those present at the time and that have nothing to do with those that come after, nothing to those living in the wooden hills of the finger lakes, or the pleasant suburbs of Denver, CO, or any other place for that matter.

Yes, the move Peter makes is to make us all directly tied to Christ's story. In our reading, he implicates those in front of him. He links his audience with events they were not directly involved in. He sees all these people in front of him as part of the story, and responsible for the story. Now, it is most likely that this is not the same crowd as was there on the temple mount when Jesus was crucified. Hundreds of thousands came through Jerusalem, if not millions, during Passover. And this moment is likely many weeks later than when Jesus was crucified. But he speaks as if these were the ones to betray Jesus; as if their hands had blood on them.

“You killed the Author of life!” he says to those gathered around the portico, there in the temple courts. They are implicated. They have something to repent of. There is a response that is expected of them, that is necessary. They are complicit.

Now my own approach to preaching is built on the conviction that the stories and struggles of scripture are relatable. As we get to know the people and stories, we find that we are not as different as we thought, that our journeys and our struggles are similar to the biblical people, and our journey with God connected to theirs. But Peter takes a little more direct tact.

“And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers.” If I was in the crowd I’d probably be looking over my shoulder to figure out who he is talking to. I wasn’t there. I have an alibi and witnesses. I am innocent of these things. But Peter continues, “¹⁸In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. ¹⁹Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, ²⁰so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, ²¹who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets.”

I wonder how they responded. If any of them got angry or defensive, or accused Peter back. Such a thing is uncomfortable because we do not like to be accused of such things. We don’t like being linked to ugly realities that we don’t see ourselves as being directly, or even remotely involved in. There are many repercussions of that biblical paradigm of human sin and brokenness and a tendency to stray from God’s purposes and make a mess of things – we see this in our world, and yet we often don’t want to be associated with such things. And in our caustic political environment, we have politicized many things and point fingers at each other, saying I’m not connected to these things, you are.

It is that tendency to finger point that makes many uncomfortable with Peter’s words here. And indeed, we tend to leverage any opportunity to point fingers and blame others while exonerating ourselves. And yet Peter makes an essential move – not allowing us to exonerate ourselves so easily - that we can be intertwined in a story that we don’t ever remember being a part of.

The Jews Peter is speaking to were not the ones to crucify Jesus, but Peter says that they are enmeshed and implicated in the story. It is no wonder that Peter and John will soon find themselves thrown in prison. But what Peter’s words indicate is something that is both uncomfortable, and necessary. He implicates those who come after. We, who hear these words now, become a part of the story. We cannot wash our hands. *But the catch is this, if they are willing to accept that implication, there is a redemptive hope that is also theirs. But they have to claim their place in the story and repent of it.*

Maybe it is our individualism. Maybe our tendency to see ourselves as the heroes and someone else always as the villain. But Peter’s interpretive move is essential to the whole story of sin and redemption. We are part of it, we are bathed in it, and we are accountable to it. We are called to repent, and to be part of the redemptive movement possible in it.

It is this connectedness to the story that we acknowledge every time we ask God for forgiveness. It is this connectedness that we embrace every time we tell each other that God loves us, every time we come to the communion table saying, that Christ's broken body and poured out blood is for you too. For in these actions, we acknowledge that our sin is implicated in Christ's cross, and that we too can find forgiveness, peace, and reconciliation there. The heart of the gospel is the willingness to be implicated.

The importance of that willingness to be implicated is not just for the forgiveness for our sins, but for our calling to be God's ambassadors for justice and love in the world. We are called to be agents for good, for God's kingdom. We are called to seek justice, to love others as Christ as loved us. And so, we do so not as innocents pointing fingers at others, but as people who are implicated in this broken world. We cannot remove ourselves from the cultural contexts and forces that have shaped us, and that we participate in, and have even benefitted from. And that is what we say when we say the prayer of confession, that we are shaped by sinful paradigms, that we too are flawed and easily misdirected, and in need of Christ's leading if we are to find another way.

What I have learned since my growing up in rural western NY is that we are not separate from the world. I have learned of the implications of our connectedness, how time and space collapse, and we are implicated both in garden of Eden, the garden of Gethsemane, and even in the evening news. And if we are willing to embrace our place in this enmeshed reality, there is hope. There is forgiveness. There is grace. There is love. But without confession. Without a willingness to come to the table of grace, there is only a refusal to acknowledge need, and an unwillingness to be implicated, an unwillingness to be healed; an unwillingness to be made whole.

Yes, Peter makes a risky move. And yet, without that move, we are separate from the story, un-implicated, and un-involved, and separate from the grace and healing and wholeness that is there. So, when we hear Peter says "you," may we not look around to see who he is talking to. May we look back at him and say yes, and Amen. And in doing so accept the grace that is there for each of us.

And all God's people said... Amen.