

“Coming to Ourselves” / Luke 15:11-32 / 10 March 2013

Marcus Borg tells a story—supposedly true—about a three-year old girl named Annie. Annie was the firstborn and only child in her family, but now her mother was pregnant again. And Annie was very excited to be getting a little brother or sister. Just a few hours after her parents brought a new baby boy home from the hospital, Annie made a request: She wanted to be left alone with her new brother in his bedroom with the door shut. This request made Annie’s parents a little uneasy. Why did she want to be alone with the baby, and why did the door have to be shut? Fortunately, the parents had a baby monitor, one of those intercom systems that you use to listen for crying babies in another room. You can use them to eavesdrop on your baby; one end transmits and the other end receives. And so the parents granted the little girl her request. They let her into the newborn’s bedroom and carefully closed the door behind her. And then they hurried to their own bedroom and listened closely to the intercom to hear if anything odd was happening in the baby’s room. They heard their daughter’s footsteps move across the baby’s bedroom to the crib. And then they heard their three-year old daughter say something strange to their three-day old son. She said, “Remind me about God—I’m starting to forget.”
Supposedly a true story.

I do remember my own children saying funny things to and about God when they were three. Some of our best theological reflection seems to take place when we’re about that age. And that’s what makes the story of Annie kind of funny and, at once both believable and hard to believe. Could a toddler truly be aware that she’s forgetting something vital about her life and the universe? There’s something kind of haunting about the story, too. It implies that we all come from God, that from birth we are acquainted with a whole different way of life. The story implies that from the beginning all we know is God. God is our source and our center, when we’re still very young. As smallest infants, we’re still under the spell of a divine life that we had before birth. As tiniest children, we still have the slightest spark of understanding that the world is supposed to be a place of trust and goodwill. But then, with time, we start to forget. Very quickly, life in this other world makes us lose track of the thing that should define us. With just a little time, we stray far from the place we come from. Life in this world makes us forget something that we all used to know, long before we could even talk.

In today’s gospel reading, we have the well-known story of the Prodigal Son. There’s a lot you can say about this gospel reading. You can talk about the younger son’s rebellion. You can talk about the father’s lavish, unexpected forgiveness. You can talk about the older brother’s righteous indignation. And I’m sure that in the course of a lifetime, each of us has played all three of those parts: the rebel, the forgiver, the jealous brother. But the words that stand out to me most are in verse seventeen: “And when he came to himself.” Here’s this young hedonist, he’s squandered half his father’s money on wine, and prostitutes, and fine clothes. He wakes up miserable one day. He finds himself amid the pigs of some faraway country, starving and alone, a stranger. And then ‘he came to himself.’ It took him long enough, but at last he remembered that life isn’t supposed to look the way it was looking. He came to himself and felt a longing for home. It’s the same longing that little Annie felt when she asked her newborn brother about God. It’s a longing that you and I feel every once in a while. At times, we ‘come to ourselves.’ We realize that we were meant for better things, that life is supposed to be something different from what it is.

And just like that prodigal, when we come to ourselves, we look around for the way back to that place where we belong. All of us, like prodigals, have been learning to forget innocence, our source, ever since we learned how to talk. All of us, like prodigals, sometimes realize that life is supposed to be something other than what it is. And all of us, like prodigals, sometimes wake up among the pigs of a far-off land. And we, like prodigals, can come home to ourselves, and to a forgiving parent.

What is your first memory? People don’t believe me, but my first memory of life took place when I was one year old. I’ve discussed this with my parents, and it’s indisputable. I remember being carried through a dark place with plastic over the carpet and flypaper dangling from the ceilings. The grownups were using flashlights, I suppose because the electricity hadn’t been connected yet. But it’s a

place I recognize from later memories as the house that we called home in Dayton, PA. The year we moved there was 1971, and I was one. It's my first memory. I guess I recall the flypaper so vividly because—only a few years later—I would watch in horror as my mother would try to pick the flies off of flypaper. She pitied the trapped flies, so she tried to free them, but only succeeded at separating their tiny legs from their tiny bodies. Since that time, I've lived in Africa; I've contracted malaria and typhoid; I've married, and become a father, and come here to share my life with you good people. So much has happened since the flypaper walk through a dark house, but it's still my very first impression of this big world. It's a memory flavored with trust. There's not a hint of fear associated with it, because no one had ever hurt me yet. No one had ever mistreated me yet. I didn't even know yet what it was to be afraid. But I remember that in the dark, among the flypaper strips, I knew a trust and calm that I could use a little more of today. But we learn very quickly, in this world, that there's a different way of life. It's called looking out for #1.

It's self-consciousness, the birth of the separated self. When we become aware of the fact that we are separate individuals, when we become self-aware, we begin to forget the One from whom we come, and in whom we live. And at some point down the road, we—like the prodigal—will need to come home to ourselves. How does a child go from the trusting little infant who gets carried innocently, trustingly, through dark houses to the distrusting little kid who puts poison berries in mud-pies and tries to get his neighbor to eat them? What happens to that first fresh blush of innocence, and why does it fade so rapidly? As we learn our way through a broken world, we take on the habits of brokenness. As we learn how to cope with this new way of life, separated from our Source, we learn that there's a difference between you and me, yours and mine. We learn the ways of self-seeking. As we become aware of the fact that we are separate from other people, then we become aware of the need to take care of ourselves. The inevitable result is self-concern, self-centeredness, self-seeking, worry. There's no avoiding it. It happens to all of us, and if it didn't then we'd be in trouble because the process of self-awareness trains us in self-protection. But it also takes away our purity, our innocence, our trust.

This process of growing self-awareness, isn't it exactly the story of Adam and Eve? It is. An Englishman, a Frenchman, and a Russian were admiring a painting of Adam and Eve. The Englishman says, "Look at their dignity, their great calm. They must be English." The Frenchman says, "Nonsense. They're so comfortable with their bodies, and so beautiful. They must be French." The Russian says, "No clothes. No shelter. Only an apple to eat. And they're being told that this is paradise? They must be Russian." Consider how the ancient story of Adam and Eve is a parable for the birth of self-awareness in your life and mine, with all the worries and woes that it entails. Adam and Eve, living in some long-forgotten paradise, become aware of such a thing as good and evil. Like toddlers, they had been happy and innocent in their ignorance. But awareness brings guilt. Awareness makes them into exiles, strangers, living in shame, hiding their nakedness behind fig leaves, somewhere east of Eden. The story of Adam and Eve is our story, each one of us. Each of us has been Adam or Eve at one point in our early life, and that's what the story of Adam and Eve is really all about.

As we grow up, the sense of separation and self-concern is intensified. As we grow older, we become more and more keenly sensitive to the ways that people see us, the ways people perceive us, what people think, what they say. Am I good enough? Am I attractive enough? Am I cool enough? What do people say about me? And we fall deeper and deeper into this second self, this self-concerned self: separation, judgment, comparison, alienation. We stray further and further from our selfless Source. Our self-concern leads us into all manner of unhappiness. How do we get so far from where we started? An infant isn't concerned with appearances or reputation. An infant doesn't care about public opinion. Hunger, pain, and loneliness are the only things that bother a very small child. Nothing else. But that small child is Adam before the Fall. That child is Eve in the Garden of Eden. Like the prodigal, we have to come back to ourselves.

Let's look again at the Prodigal Son and his long journey away from himself, and back. How did he finally come to himself? And how can you and I do it? Well, any member of AA will tell you how. The Prodigal had to hit rock bottom. He only came to himself when his artificial life became unbearable. He came to himself when he met up with those three primal enemies that a baby hates: hunger, pain, and loneliness. You see, you and I can go along fooling ourselves into living out of false identities right up until the day when we're faced with those things a child hates: hunger, pain, and loneliness. I recently read that Americans are the most depressed people in the modern world. Nearly ten percent of Americans suffer from some form of clinical depression. America, where we all have so much, where life is so good, and I can be whoever I want to be? Nigeria is the least depressed nation on earth, at a mere 0.8 percent of the populace: Nigeria where tribal conflict, governmental corruption, and poverty are all rampant? How? Well, it's simple. Africans spend their lives addressing the real issues: hunger, pain, and loneliness. And once you're free from those three, well, what more could you want? They find meaning in family ties. They look for their private identities in their religion. They understand their place in the world by looking to their traditions. Africans are happier because their lives are less complicated by the need to put on a show.

We're prodigals, you and I. Not that we're rebellious, but we've wandered long and far from the place where we started, the place where we belong. We finally come to ourselves when we release our grip on those things that matter little, and invest our lives in things that matter much: like the work of alleviating hunger, pain, and loneliness in this world. Money doesn't do it for us. Power, prestige, good repute, a fashionable address. These are the pigpens of a foreign land; they will take everything we can give them but they won't give us peace with the person whose teeth we brush every morning. The prodigal came to himself, and when he did, that forgiving Parent ran to embrace him. Let us, too, come to ourselves, and find our peace in lives of simplicity, in God our Source. Amen.