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 Text: Luke 2: 41-52
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“The Jesus I Left Behind”

In 1964, Shusaku Endo, a Japanese novelist I revere, published a book entitled *The Girl I Left Behind*. It's the story of a young man whose future is assured, one who mistreats a woman who cared about him, casually discarding her. While the young man achieves success in business, the woman, Mitsu, becomes a kind of Christ figure, choosing to work among the diseased in a hospital. Endo said that he intended to portray the drama of “the Jesus I left behind,” a drama that pertains to every person of faith.¹ But I also take it that that dynamic pertains to something much wider, much deeper, than questions of religious orientation. Jesus, in Endo's conception, is a symbol for all the ways individuals and institutions depart from what they know to be true, what they know to be best, what they know to be right, what they know to be just, in service of short term or temporary gains. Configure Jesus, then, for the sources of goodness and life that we sometimes knowingly, sometimes unknowingly, leave behind in our lives. Sometimes it's necessary to retrace your steps, going back, in order to find what you've lost or forgotten.

That's what happens in the story of Joseph and Mary returning to Nazareth. They learned they had left Jesus behind in Jerusalem. They were a day's journey out, and they had assumed their child was with relatives that they trusted. Upon learning he was not, they were forced to stop in their tracks, and to go back to the source of their error, where they found the Jesus they had left behind.

It's a story that speaks on a number of different levels. It speaks, first of all, to churches, to all organizations that bear the name of Jesus. And so let the story speak first of all to us. It suggests that it's possible to travel a long way before you realize that Jesus is no longer with you, that in fact he's nowhere to be found. Churches do that all the time. We do it when we forget that the beginning and end of Jesus's ministry was to the least of these, to the widow, the orphan and the stranger. We do it when we forget that in crucial ways, we all bear a resemblance to the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, which ought to allow us to identify with those bearing those scars. We do it when we forget that Jesus is not an instrument of state power, or the desire for such, but is, rather, an invitation to imagine and enact a form of life that is humane, healing, just, and truthful. We do it when we forget that Jesus is not an instrument of our own personal salvation in the sweet by and by, but is instead a summons to participate in a hopeful and embracing way of life in this world, not in some other world, in the here and now, not some imaginary afterlife. Some churches, and some individual Christians, can go a long way before they come to understand, if ever they do, that they have abandoned the foundation of their faith. We saw ample evidence of that this past Wednesday, as people knelt in prayer before storming the Capitol, as they carried their crosses, as they toted their signs reading “Jesus Saves.” We see evidence of that whenever churches and people of faith fail to decouple themselves from the bigotry that so often travels under the name of Christianity, under the banner of Jesus. Even with all the external appurtenances of faith, you can still walk a long way before you realize that Jesus was abandoned a long time ago. Let the Jesus of this story stand for all the ways churches,

¹ Endo, Shusaku, *The Girl I Left Behind* (Japan, 1964, translation, New York: New Directions, 1994), pg. 194.

and people of faith, abandon the one they claim to revere. But let it also stand for the possibility of returning.

The story speaks to our personal lives as well. Let the Mary and Joseph within the story stand for the ways we often leave behind crucial pieces of our integrity. Let it stand for the ways we can all too easily forget who we are. As human beings, we all have the propensity to strike out upon a path that, sooner or later, we find out is simply wrong. If we're fortunate, we realize our error before it's too late, and we can retrace our steps, getting back to our core values or beliefs. You know as well as I do that it can happen in our closest relationships. We can become close with those we ought not become close to, and it can create enormous pain for our families, or to our reputations. Sometimes we have to retrace our steps, to go back to basics, in order to reclaim what we've left behind. We can hope that there are some individuals who, after participating in the events of Wednesday, will be shaken enough to step back, and to reclaim core values of truth, decency, and respect for democratic institutions. We can hope that others, those who didn't directly participate in Wednesday's events, but who have nevertheless aided and abetted the individuals responsible for instigating it with their dollars and votes, might also realize how far they have departed from their own deepest humanity. We can hope that, no matter our political affiliations, we can all pause long enough to listen, to learn, and to get ourselves back to norms of civility and respect, even though we may disagree. Let this story provide an assurance that, in every human life, such returns are possible.

There are also more benign ways that the story functions in our personal lives. For many of us, the pandemic has been an invitation to reclaim parts of ourselves, or parts of our past, that we've just sort of forgotten. It's been an invitation to retrace our steps and to reacquaint ourselves with some things we had neglected, not from malice, but because life somehow intervened. For me, that's meant having conversations with friends and family members I hadn't spent enough time with in recent years. It's meant returning to some novels that had once formed my sense of identity, as a means of reclaiming some of the truths that had once animated my life. It's meant a basic reaffirmation of my sense of faith, a fundamental trust that even in the scariest moments, we're not alone, that God is with us. There are moments that life affords us opportunities to retrace our steps, and to recapture that which we haven't lost, exactly, but that we've somehow neglected. And so let Jesus in the story stand for those basic life principles we sometimes do need to reclaim.

But let the Jesus within the story, the Jesus that we've left behind, also stand for a process that can happen within collective bodies, within institutions, or even nations. Let the return that Mary and Joseph are forced to make stand for the necessary adjustments that need to be made in democracies in order to affirm the best, and not the worst, within ourselves.

To that end, I'd like to share a story that demonstrates just that. It's one that I've been saving for just the right moment. It's a story that begins at the foot of Canal Street, in New Orleans. A year and a half ago during our annual pilgrimage, I insisted on taking my kids to visit the sites where four Confederate monuments had been removed. It was a kind of return – to a decisive moment when those monuments were placed there, and to another moment when they were removed. My kids weren't happy about it. It was a blazing hot afternoon, and it was one more thing their dad was making them do, for a reason they couldn't discern. Who cared about the places where some statues used to be, they wondered. But Rachael and I shooed them into the van, where they stewed and muttered in the back. It only lasted a few minutes, until we arrived at the first pedestal.

It stands just outside the New Orleans Museum of Art, a block of concrete where a horse and rider had once been mounted. I shared why those statues had been placed there, and what it was meant to signify to the city's black population. I shared how angry some people became when it was proposed that the statues be removed, and how long it took to persuade people in the city that it was the right thing to do. I told them how local contractors refused to be involved with the removal, for fear of their lives, and livelihoods. I shared how the mayor couldn't even find a crane to get the work done, and how firms from out of state had to be brought in to actually do the removals. I told them how those firms, and the workers, had to remain anonymous, for fear of violent reprisals. I told them how it had to happen in the dead of night, for fear of mob violence, and of how all the workers had to wear masks to protect their identity from violent zealots. I shared how snipers had to be placed in trees all around the removal sites, in order to protect workers from angry reprisals. I told them about the hateful calls and emails and letters that the then mayor of New Orleans, Mitch Landrieu, received. As the car air conditioner fought against the summer heat of New Orleans, I told the stories at each of the four sites, and I'm telling you, my kids were rapt. You see, we were learning how hard it is to retrace one's steps, to go back, and to right something that was destructive and wrong.

Three of the four monuments were of single individuals, Confederate leaders who were enshrined in the years following the collapse of Reconstruction, when whites across the South reasserted their power. Like the monuments erected in other parts of the South, those in New Orleans were placed there, in part, to remind black citizens who was in charge. The memorial at the foot of Canal Street was placed there for precisely that reason, though its origins were a little different. The foot of Canal Street is a busy cross section of the city, adjacent to the French Quarter and a half block or so from the Mississippi River. There's a casino there now, and a number of highrise hotels. And until 2017, there was a monument there memorializing not a Confederate soldier, but rather a successful coup, one with overtones not unlike what we witnessed this past Wednesday. The monument was called the Battle of Liberty Place Monument, and it was placed there in 1891 to commemorate an event that took place in 1874.

Here's the background. In the election of 1872, a Republican who was sympathetic to the work of Reconstruction won the Governor's seat. For the next two years, secessionists and white supremacists contested the legitimacy of the election, insisting, wrongly, that their own candidate had won. It all came to a head in 1874, some 3500 members of the White League, a racist paramilitary force, laid siege to the city. In the Battle of Liberty Place there at the foot of Canal Street, they defeated the city's police force, and then went on to occupy the government buildings and the armory in New Orleans. From there, they removed the lawfully elected governor from office, and installed their own candidate, the very man who had lost two years previously. The President at the time was Ulysses S. Grant, and several days later he sent federal troops to win back control of the city. The federal troops were successful, and they reinstated the previously deposed Governor. But none of the perpetrators faced significant consequences for the coup. Two years later, they seized the city for a second time, ensuring that their candidate for governor would be installed. And he was. Because the instigators of the insurrection faced no consequences the first time around, the White League wound up simply biding their time, waiting until just the right moment to strike. When they did, they effectively destroyed the work of Reconstruction in Louisiana. It was a model that soon was taken up all around the South.

The monument was erected in 1891, but in 1932, a telling inscription was added: "United States troops took over the state government and reinstated the usurpers but the national election

of November 1876 recognized white supremacy in the South and gave us our state.” Those words, along with the monument celebrating the successful coup of the White League, remained in place until just four years ago, there for tourists and business people, white citizens, black citizens, and everyone in between, to contemplate and behold. I’m grateful that mayor Mitch Landrieu, together with the city council of the city of New Orleans, doubled back, realizing their mistake. I’m grateful that they sought to correct their path going forward.

The successful coup organized by the White League is the precise blueprint for what occurred on a national scale this past Wednesday. The story was on my mind when I saw the unforgettable image of the man holding the Confederate flag in the halls of the Capitol. It was on my mind even before Jamelle Bouie, a columnist for the *New York Times*, cited the story in the days following the Wednesday attack.² And it has been on my mind whenever I’ve heard the now familiar words of response to the Wednesday uprising: “This is not who we are.” To which I respond: it is exactly who we are. Unfortunately, sadly, tragically, this is a very large part of who we are, and the Battle at Liberty Place, together with the events of January 6th, 2021, demonstrate that it’s so. But the removed memorial also demonstrates that those impulses are not the entirety of who we are. It demonstrates that it’s possible to retrace our steps, to go back in order to discover, or if we’re lucky, to rediscover, the best of who we are, to find the hopeful future that Jesus represents in the story. It means it’s possible to backtrack, and to start again.

Let there be no mistake: what we witnessed on Wednesday was a white supremacist insurrection. There was nothing surprising about it, for the outgoing President has been cheerleading such efforts for the past five years. Those years have been a long, slow, departure from the noblest and best impulses that bind us. And all signs point to the painful reality that many people aren’t yet willing to come to terms with just how far we’ve all departed from those norms.

Nevertheless, despite it all, I remain hopeful. My hope isn’t born from a vague sense that everything will be alright, or that we can simply get through this together, or that better days are on their way. Those things might all be true, but my hope springs from the notion of a Jesus we’ve left behind, one who still waits for us, beckoning us to return. It springs from stories such as the one found in Luke chapter 2, and in the painful, arduous, and persistent labor of those who have retraced the steps of history, who have reclaimed some aspect of a lost democratic spirit, and who have set out again upon a new path. That option is available. It’s not too late. We haven’t traveled too far, not yet. We can still return, and we can still find a Jesus that we’ve left behind. That’s true for churches. It’s true for each and every one of us as individuals, as we seek to center ourselves in what is good and noble, decent and true. And it’s true of a whole society, shaken by a grotesque display of fatuous deceit, ignorance, and mob rule. There is still time to turn around. It’s never too late to retrace our steps.

Despite it all, I remain hopeful. I remain hopeful, for when Mary and Joseph could not find Jesus, they returned on the way they had come to search for him. And after three days’ time, the text reports, they found him, right where they had left him. He was waiting, just the way he waits for us.

² Jamelle Bouie, “Running Out the Clock on Trump is Cowardly and Dangerous,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 2021.