

"Praise!" That's a word we do not use often during Lent! The old saying was that, *"We bury the Alleluias during Lent so that they can be raised up on Easter with our risen Lord Jesus."* It seems odd to use the word *"Praise"* when our focus is repentance during these forty days. So let's change our thinking. Could it be that PRAISE is not just a warm and fuzzy feeling, but is an expression of gratitude to a God of mercy and great care and even greater grace? A God who celebrates when the lost are found? In the story of the Prodigal Son, Jesus shows how praise and thanksgiving are at the heart of this party.

The true beauty of a story, is when that story never gets old, no matter how often it is told. So it is with the story of the Prodigal Son. The only danger of this story getting old and meaningless, is when we forget to find ourselves in the characters and when we fail to see who God is and how God sees us.

There are many ways to listen to this story! Tonight let's try using a first-person telling. It takes imagination, another gift from God! While many, if not most, identify with the younger son or the older brother, it is important for us to become LIKE the father. The words of Jesus remind us to be compassionate as our Father is compassionate. That is tonight's invitation and our challenge!

LET'S LISTEN IN, AS THE FATHER SPEAKS:

I was the proud father of two sons. Like all parents, I worried about them and I knew how different they were from one another, and how alike they were as well! I loved them both with a deep, abiding and abounding love!

Like a knife in my heart, the pain I felt was almost unbearable. My younger son came to me to say he was leaving home, leaving me, leaving everything we had worked for! He asked for his share of the inheritance. This was more than a journey away from home; this was separation from my love. By asking for his inheritance, he was cutting off our relationship, as if to say, "You are dead to me, Father."

I was devastated and filled with grief. I so wanted to take him by the shoulders and shake some sense into him, but I had no choice. I had to let him go. To see him walk away was like a funeral procession.

I watched him until I could no longer see him. My eyes filled with tears. My heart was broken beyond words. My son was lost to me, and I could not imagine him returning. His mind was made up; his heart was filled with resistance. There was no sound of praise in my house. And even as he walked away, I promised I would NEVER stop loving him or waiting for his return.

Like most days around here, the weather was hot and dry. My older son was working in the fields. He was obedient, hard working, and I was grateful to have him living under my roof.

Looking out at the distant horizon, I spotted what looked like the figure of a man walking all alone. The way this person walked reminded me of my lost son, but I thought my imagination was playing tricks on me. It must be a mirage! Not able to take my eyes off this person, I realized, the closer he came, this was, indeed, my son!

I ran to him, my feet going as fast as they could take me. With no words spoken, I could tell he was hungry and tired and desperate. It did not matter! My heart was filled with joy! I felt nothing but praise and thanksgiving! Praise God for rescuing my lost son and bringing him home. Praise God! My son who was dead to his Father and home, is alive and returned! There is no other word to describe my joy than PRAISE.

This kind of praise cannot be contained! I ordered my servants to prepare a feast, kill the fatted calf, invite our friends, serve the finest wine, and party hearty, party for LIFE!

It was quite a bash, a homecoming blowout... except... for my older son... who refused to participate. Believe it or not, I felt the same heartbreaking pain over my older son. In my own way, I knew that he was lost too. Not in the same way, but lost, nonetheless. His heart was lost! Lost in jealousy and resentment!

I shared with my older son, that all I have IS his! This party is about the dead being RAISED TO LIFE! The lost BEING FOUND! His brother is ALIVE!

I invited him to the party, hoping the love he had for his younger brother would overcome his anger, his jealousy, his resentment, his hatred.

And that is where Jesus lets this story end.

I think we can all relate to everything that this father is feeling.

But then I think that we can identify with the older son as well. *"It's just not fair! I stayed to work! And now he comes waltzing back in! I can't have a party with my friends! And here is a party to end all! I am NOT going to celebrate! I am NOT going to be thankful! I am NOT going to give praise!"*

And yet moving from hatred to love, from fear to joy, from pouting to praise, is exactly where God is calling us in this story.

It is not easy to forgive! Not even easy with the people that are closest to us! Our hearts want to be filled with joy and praise, on our own terms. But we are called to love one another with the same love that God has for each one of us.

Welcome home! Praise God! When the one who WAS lost, IS found!

During Lent and in every season, we celebrate finding our home in God's heart!

Let us live this Lent as found people, pondering our purpose, proclaiming our place in God's family, praising God for His gracious love, and, heading straight for the Resurrection.

And all God's children say,

Amen.

Sola Deo Gloria!