

To Be Good Again

One of my favorite books in the past few years is the *Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. I'll say I'm sorry up front because I'm giving away some of the surprise twists and turns of the story. Even so, I hope you'll pick the book up. Some books can preach!

Set in Afghanistan in the year before and then, the time of, the Soviet invasion, Hosseini tells the story of Amir, a son of a wealthy and powerful man, and Hassan, the son of the family's servant. Amir and Hassan grow up laughing, playing together. The love between them is expressed by Hassan in words that are etched in Amir's memory. In response to Amir asking would you really do that for me, Hassan replies, "for you, a thousand times over." At the end of the day, though, the master, Amir would sleep in the finest home in Kabul and Hassan, the servant, in his dirt hut.

Hassan is described as the stronger and perhaps even the smarter one. He had this habit of protecting Amir by standing up to Amir's bullies. One day, Amir won a kite flying contest whose goal is to fly the kite in such a way that the string, lined with sharp pieces of glass, cuts the other kites out of the sky. On this fateful day, Amir's was the last kite flying. When it cut the string, Hassan with many other boys chased after the prize...Hassan wanting to bring it to Amir that he might always remember the day he won. Hassan succeeds in "running down the kite." At the moment he holds Amir's kite in his arms, Hassan is cornered by those bullies who retaliate, not just with fists but with acts of great cruelty. Amir comes across the violent scene as it unfolds; he watches the one who loved him enough to stand up for him, be brutalized.

That night, when Hassan returned to the house, Amir stops speaking to him. Day after day, silence. No more play or shared stories. After a while, Hassan's father sees no choice but to take Hassan away from the one whose love has turned cold. Because Hassan and his father are of the wrong ethnicity, during the time of war, they end up living in horrible conditions. Eventually, Hassan, his dad, and his wife, die, leaving behind Sohrab, his son, an orphan.

Amir narrates his own story. The 'voice' in these excerpts from the first pages of the book is his.

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment crouching

behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek. That was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years.

Amir lives in San Francisco. He is married. He has a child, a job, all the things that should make one happy. He goes on to write...

“One day last summer, my friend Rahim Khan called from Pakistan. He asked me to come see him....After I hung up, I went for a walk along Spreckels Lake on the northern edge of Golden Gate Park.... I glanced up and saw a pair of kites, red with long blue tails, soaring in the sky.... And suddenly Hassan's voice whispered in my head: For you, a thousand times over.

I sat on a park bench near a willow tree. I thought about something Rahim Khan said just before he hung up, almost as an afterthought. There is a way to be good again.

The rest of the book tells the story of Amir's journey to help Sohrab, the reason for Rahim's call. Amir travels back into his past, back into Afghanistan, seeking freedom—freedom from the memory of his unmentionable cruelty; freedom from the guilt of having sent away the one who truly loved him.

There is a way to be good again.

In our scripture, people poured into the wilderness. They gathered at the river to be baptized by John the Baptist for the 'forgiveness of sins.' The promise made to them was similar...there is a way to be good again.

To get to the river they must journey into the wilderness. The wilderness draws from a deep well of meaning in the Bible. The wilderness is the place where Israel complained about the lack of food and water when they left Pharaoh and slavery to the Egyptians behind. The wilderness is the place where they built and worshipped a golden calf while God was giving Moses the 10 commandments on the mountain. The wilderness marks both the place where God's power and love seemed most close—he led them by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night—and the place where Israel first begins to push away the one who truly loves them.

The crowd enters the wilderness. One person after another after another enters into the rushing water. They stand in its current with John and allow him to push them under, that they might be free.

Something changed in them because of that baptism. We are told that "...the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah..."

Whether he might be the Messiah...the Christ...the Savior.

The people were excited about this baptism of repentance. They felt something happening in their hearts, in their very lives. They had been touched by that which is holy. They wanted more.

John the Baptist was certainly a powerful speaker. His rhetorical ability is documented by the early historian Josephus who writes...“When others too joined the crowds about him, because they were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons, Herod became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on mankind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked as if they would be guided by John in everything they did. Herod decided therefore that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of him before his work led to an uprising, than to wait for an upheaval, get involved in a difficult situation and see his mistake!” [Josephus Antiquities of the Jews 18:116 -19]

People looked to John to lead them into a new future. They looked to him for the 10 year strategic plan for making a difference in their world. They wanted more than just do good in what you do...they wanted that same spirit which they felt move in their souls at their baptism to be unleashed in the world.

They were willing to be guided by John in all they did.

There's a poignant moment in Amir's journey when he finds out that the couple to which he was to bring Sohrab, the man and woman who were supposedly waiting to care for Hassan's son, never existed. Rahim, the one who phoned Amir from Pakistan, made them up.

The path Amir thought he was traveling disappears from view. And it is at this moment that Amir's journey of repentance opens him to a larger possibility. When we come to this part of the story, we know that Sohrab has lived a life that has left him as broken as was Hassan.

Rahim invited Amir into the wilderness so that Amir might not just repent but that he might become more than what he was the winter day in 1975.

The book ends with Amir's kite once again winning a competition, this time in San Francisco. He, the man, cuts his kite and lets it fall to the ground. He turns to Sohrab and asks,

Do you want me to run that kite for you?

His Adam's apple rose and fell as he swallowed. The wind lifted his hair. I thought I saw him nod.

For you a thousand times over," I heard myself say.

Then I turned and ran.

Amir's journey into Afghanistan was not the end, but a beginning, an opening that Amir might enter again into a relationship with the one who loved him—the one he loved. Likewise, the crowd's baptism of repentance and our own baptism, is the beginning, an opening to something more.

John the Baptist understood his part. He preached a baptism of repentance with eloquence. He stood in the waters with those who sought to leave behind the past which marked their souls; their past which marked them as unfaithful. Yet he understood that, despite how big he seemed in their eyes, he was too small an answer. A relationship with him, John the Baptist, would not allow the baptism of repentance to find its true meaning. So instead of a strategic plan that begins and ends with him he reminds the crowd that there is more to come.

"I baptize you with water; but the one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." The speech goes on. By the time it comes to an end with the burning chaff and is then followed by the description of Herod's evil, there is no doubt, at least in my mind, that the baptism cannot make the world good again.

John is shut up in a prison. The path the crowd thought they were traveling disappears from view. It is at this moment that their baptism of repentance opens to them a larger possibility—to become more than those whose ancestors worshipped the golden calf--to become faithful.

When John is imprisoned, Luke records no weeping or wailing. There is no huge protest. Instead, John's imprisonment is recorded without emotion as if it were inevitable.

It is inevitable that a path that looks only to a mere mortal will someday come to an end. It is inevitable that evil will seek to erase the paths upon which our hope is built. It is inevitable that at times, for awhile, evil will succeed.

Yet, those who met John the Baptist at the river, those who entered into the waters of repentance then and today, they/we have been opened to a new possibility.

The portion of Luke's gospel that tells of John the Baptist has as its prelude familiar words and imagery from Isaiah...

John is ...

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
And the crooked shall be made straight,
And the rough ways made smooth;
And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

The possibility is the salvation of God. In Luke, the salvation of God has a name...Jesus. [Luke 2:30]

John's baptism of repentance, our own baptism, opens us to the possibility of the relationship God means us to have ... with him.

For it is God we have sent away all too often

Because, at times, we care about other things more.

Because, at times, we blame God for the wrong done to us; for all the trouble in the world.

Because, at times, we don't want to yield ourselves to a plan not our own or a path we cannot see.

So God gives to us his son.

That we might again stand near our God, that we might be free to hear his voice.

For when we have been far from the one we love; when we, through our own mistakes, our own decisions and behavior, our own pain, send the one we love away...we don't simply want to be good again....we want to know that love again. We long to hear a voice that opens once more the possibility of living life in the love we once knew.

Jesus was praying....

Then the heaven was opened.

Then the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.

Then came the voice that we long to hear: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

In Luke these words are for Jesus alone. This is not a public appearance of the spirit, that will come later, but a description of that which happened when Jesus chose to the way of faith.

While no one else will ever be spoken of in Luke/Acts as "the Beloved," the disciples will be led forth by that same spirit and prayer. They will, despite their past, their doubts and their wrong turns, they too will choose to say "yes" to God. They too will hear God's voice.

And they will run and we will run

With joy

Because we are free... free again... to love God.

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, set us free today of all that gets in the way of our loving you. Through the life of your son Jesus show us the way to hear your voice. Remind us today, in communion, of your nearness ... that we might sing out with joy for love of you. This we ask in Jesus name, the one who taught us to pray saying...