

Choosing Redemption

John 1:1-18

A sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes

“Everyone Believes in Redemption.” That’s the title of a study conducted a few years ago by two economists, and it reflects their findings: that everyone believes in redemption. That sounds encouraging, right? Especially at this time of year. “*Everyone believes in redemption*” sounds a lot like “*good news of great joy for all people*” . . . like a savior you’ll drop everything to seek lying in a manger . . . like light darkness cannot overcome. “*Everyone believes in redemption*” sounds like everyone believing in forgiveness, in second chances, in the possibility we’ll become the people we WANT to be. At New Year’s we see belief like that translate into good resolutions. We’ll be kinder to strangers and co-workers and family members. We’ll lead healthier lives: we’ll eat better, drink less, quit smoking, start exercising. We’ll get our finances under control. Everyone believes in redemption! That sounds hopeful.

But the researchers had a different kind of redemption in mind, and their findings were, in fact, rather discouraging. What they did was offer participants in their study a chance to earn \$20 by redeeming a mail-in form. (It was that kind of redemption.) All the participants in the study had to do was print a “certification page” to mail with their form and get the money. When they got the instructions, they were asked to predict if they’d follow them. “Of course,” they said. Nearly everyone felt sure they’d redeem the form. But less than half of them actually did.

The researchers tried a couple of things to help bring word and deed into line. They tried to adjust the participants’ expectations by warning them that a previous group had been OVER-OPTIMISTIC they would mail in the forms. That reality-check did nothing to affect the new group’s optimism. The researchers sent reminders, too, as the deadlines for redemption approached. The participants mostly ignored the reminders. The only thing that helped was when the researchers said, “Nevermind about the ‘certification page’ . . . you don’t need to print that after all.” THAT’S when they saw the redemption rates rise; when they made things easier.

That everyone believes in redemption is actually a challenge to redemption, the researchers concluded. Of course we want the money. Of course we want better health, better relationships, a less frantic schedule (insert your New Year’s Resolution here). In our enthusiasm, we underestimate the costs and challenges involved in whatever we’ve said we’ll do. (If it matters, it’s going to require something of us!) That is where inertia comes in. It’s a powerful force, and we often succumb to it.

The study suggests that the best thing we can do is to simplify: what will make it easier for us to do what we’ve said we want to do? . . . Want to be more generous? Put your church or charity on an automatic payment plan. Want to spend less time online? Program the wifi to shut off at night. Want to eat less junk food? Keep it out of the house. That’s good advice.

But here’s what occurred to me, as I read our scriptures for today: When God wanted to redeem us, there was nothing easy about it. God chose what was, arguably, the most challenging and

costly way. God became flesh, took on gravity, became subject to inertia, disappointment, pain, weariness, and death. God did this to redeem us and make us capable of redemption.

It is striking, especially in light of the discrepancy, typically, between human resolutions and actions, that God's word and deed are so utterly unified. "*Logos*" is the Greek word John uses. It means "*Word*," and it points to many things. "*Logos*" harks back to God's creative activity in Genesis. There God speaks, and the world is created! God's word *IS* God's deed. "*Logos*" evokes God's covenant promises – God's steadfast love and law – which are NEVER optimistic, but always reliable, always trustworthy. God's word is as good as God's deed. And for John the *Logos* is Jesus – the man who embodied God's wisdom . . . who not only *BELIEVED* in redemption, but also *CHOSE IT* every single time. Jesus Christ is God's word performing God's deeds.

And that is a witness I need – now maybe more than ever. Maybe it's because I'm getting older (or, as my daughter would say, I'm getting *old*). Maybe it's because many of us have endured so much loss lately – too many deaths, timely and untimely. Maybe it's because so many of us are feeling with new intensity the injustices and tragedies suffered by too many people in our country . . . I'm tired of talk – of *JUST TALK*, that is. Tired of words that don't correspond to deeds . . . tired of plans that don't materialize . . . tired of discussions that dead end. I'm grateful for John's witness that God not only believes in redemption, but chooses it and accomplishes it. *GOD REDEEMS*.

And that isn't all John says. John says that we who receive God's Word are given *POWER* to become children of God – power to be like Christ! I think John must mean, in part, we're given what it takes to *CHOOSE* as Jesus chose – even the hard thing, if that's what's needed – so our *EFFORTS* at redemption will match our *BELIEF* in redemption. Discipleship is something *GIVEN* and *ACHIEVED* in John's gospel . . . something we are *BLESSED WITH*, and something we must also *WORK* to do. So it is *hard* – to follow Christ, and to do the kinds of things he does – but we are equipped for it.

I recently re-read Michelle Alexander's book, "*The New Jim Crow*," and was moved again by the way she concludes it. She quotes a letter James Baldwin wrote his nephew in 1962. I found the text of the original letter, in which Baldwin says:

I have begun this letter five times and torn it up five times. I keep seeing your face, which is also the face of your father and my brother. I have known both of you all your lives and have carried your daddy in my arms and on my shoulders, kissed him and spanked him and watched him learn to walk. I don't know if you have known anybody from that far back, if you have loved anybody that long, first as an infant, then as a child, then as a man. You gain a strange perspective on time and human pain and effort.

Baldwin's perspective was (I summarize) that racism was still powerful in this country, that it had led to the impoverishment of many – including his nephew – and that most white people had little clue. "They," Baldwin said, "have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them indeed know better, but as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know."

You must love them, [Baldwin told his nephew. They] are your brothers, your lost younger brothers, and if the word ‘integration’ means anything, this is what it means: that we with love shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it . . . It will be hard, but you come from sturdy peasant stock, men who picked cotton, dammed rivers, built railroads, and in the teeth of the most terrifying odds, achieved an unassailable and monumental dignity. You come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest poets since Homer. One of them said, “The very time I thought I was lost, my dungeon shook and my chains fell off.”

I had to look up that poetry. It’s from the old African-American spiritual “Free at Last.” Redeemed, that is. Capable of redemption.

To live as God’s children in the world *IS* hard. It means choosing the kinds of things Jesus chose: to be generous even if we’re feeling selfish . . . to speak the truth even when it means saying something no one wants to hear . . . to exercise love and compassion even when we are angry and scared . . . to stop and pray even if we’re busy (maybe especially then). It is hard. But we come from God’s stock, all of us *empowered to become children of God* who ACT on what we know, what we believe, what we think God wants for us.

That last thing I mentioned is one of my resolutions for the New Year – to stop and pray. I think it’s something God wants for me and from me. I mean more than composing prayers for worship. (That’s easier, in a way, because there’s a deadline: the bulletin goes to print!) And I mean more than praying for people and situations. What I want is to sit in God’s presence, attentive and open. There may be ways to make that easier, too – make a schedule, set an alarm on my phone, I don’t know. For now, I want to try another proven method.

Studies show that when people set goals for themselves, there’s an 8% chance they’ll do what they decided to do. That chance increases when they write the goal down, when they tell someone about it and, especially, when they ask someone to hold them accountable. If you write it, tell someone, and arrange for another person to hold you accountable, there is an 85% chance you’ll do what you decided to do.

I think the results of that study reflect the gifts of God’s incarnation. God became a person. And one of the first things Jesus did, when he began his public ministry, was to build a community of people who would hold each other accountable to the goals they set for themselves. John says Jesus conveyed to these people grace and truth. In other words, he loved them. And with love, he forced them to see themselves as they were, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it. It was hard, but that’s what Jesus did. And he makes us able to do it for each other. A member of my congregation has said she’ll do it for me. Anytime our congregations gather, we have rooms full of people who can do it for each other.

Choosing redemption – choosing health, choosing wisdom, choosing peace and love and justice, choosing all God wants for the world – is hard. We come from good stock, though – people God has redeemed and made capable of redemption. The question is, will we pursue it? I think we can! I hope we will.

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