LENT 4 C Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

**Open Arms**

The characters we meet during **Lent,** they aren’t exactly what you’d call

a list of ***“Who’s Who in Purity and Sainthood.”***

In fact, some of their antics and attitudes would make you think of

the Saturday night crowd at the county jail.

What few halos there are among this befuddled bunch

could probably use a bit of straightening and polish.

Yet, strange as it may seem it is this very humanness

that makes these people refreshing. They are so refreshing

that should you ever need a reminder of God’s tolerance,

you’d find it in these people.

If you ever wonder how in the world

God could use you to change the world, look at these people.

What people? The people God used to change history.

A rag-bag of ne’er-do-wells and has-beens who found hope,

not in their performance, but in God’s proverbially open arms.

Let’s start with **Abraham**.

Though eulogized by Paul for his faith,

this Father of a Nation wasn’t without his weaknesses.

He had a fibbing tongue that wouldn’t stop!

One time, in order to save his neck, he let the word get out

that Sarah wasn’t his wife but his sister, which was only half true.***1***

And then, not long later, he did it again!

***“And there Abraham said of his wife, Sarah, ‘She is my sister.’”2***

Twice he traded in his integrity for security.

That’s what you call confidence in God’s promises?

Can you build a nation on that kind of faith?

God took what was good and forgave what was bad

and used ***“old forked tongue”*** to start a nation.

Another household name is **Moses**.

Definitely one of history’s greatest.

But until he was eighty years old he looked like

he wouldn’t amount to much more than

a one-upon-a-time prince turned outlaw.

Would you choose a wanted murderer to lead a nation out of bondage?

Would you call upon a fugitive to carry the Ten Commandments?

God did.

And he called him, of all places, right out of a sheep pasture.

Called his name through a burning bush.

Scared old Moses right out of his shoes!

There, with knees knocking and ***“Who me?”*** written all over his face.

Moses agreed to go back into the ring.

And what can you say about a fellow whose lust got so lusty

that he got a woman pregnant, tried to blame it on her husband,

had her husband killed, and then went on living

like nothing ever happened?

Well, you could say he was a man after God’s own heart.

David’s track record left little to be desired,

but his repentant spirit was unquestionable.

Then comes **Jonah.**

God’s ambassador to Nineveh. Jonah, however, had other ideas.

He had not desire to go to that heathen city.

So he hopped on another boat while God wasn’t looking

(or at least that’s what Jonah thought).

God put him in a whale’s belly to ring him back to his senses.

But even the whale couldn’t stomach this missionary for too long.

A good burp and Jonah went flying over the surf

and landed big-eyed and repentant on the beach.

(Which just goes to show that you can’t keep a good man down!)

And on and on the stories go:

**Elijah**, the prophet who pouted;

**Solomon**, the king who knew too much;

**Jacob**, the wheeler-dealer;

**Gomer**, the prostitute;

**Sarah**, the woman who giggled at God.

One story after another of God using man’s best

and overcoming man’s worst.

Even the genealogy of Jesus is salted with a dubious character or two –

**Tamar** the adulteress, **Rahab** the harlot, and **Bathsheba**,

who tended to take baths in questionable locations.

The reassuring lesson is clear,

God used (and uses!) people to change the world.

***People!***

Not saints or superhumans or geniuses, but people.

Crooks, creeps, lovers, and liars – he uses them all.

And what they may lack in perfection, God makes up for in love.

Jesus later summarized God’s stubborn love with a parable.

He told about a teenager who decided that life at the farm

was too slow for his tastes.

So, with pockets full of inheritance money, he set out to find the big time.

What he found instead were hangovers, fair-weather friends,

and long unemployment lines.

When he had had just about as much of the pig’s life as he could take,

he swallowed his pride, dug his hands deep into his empty pockets,

and began the long walk home;

all the while rehearsing a speech that he planned to give to his father.

He never used it. Just when he got to the top of the hill,

his father, who’d been waiting at the gate, saw him.

The boy’s words of apology were quickly muffled by

the father’s words of forgiveness.

And the boy’s weary body fell into the father’s opened arms.

The same open arms welcomed him that had welcomed

**Abraham, Moses, David, and Jonah.**

No wagging fingers. No clenched fists. No ***“I told you so!”*** slaps

or ***“Where have you been?”*** interrogations.

No crossed arms. No black eyes or fat lips.

No. Only sweet, open arms. If you ever wonder how God can use you

to make a difference in your world,

just look at those he has already used and take courage.

And, by the way, never were those arms opened so wide

as they were on the Roman cross.

One arm extending back into history and the other reaching into the future.

An embrace of forgiveness offered for anyone who’ll come.

A hen gathering her chicks.

A father receiving his own.

A redeemer redeeming the world.

No wonder they call him Savior! Amen.

**Notes:**

1. **Genesis 12:10-20**
2. **Genesis 20:2**