

“Response-ability & Grace at CHRISTmas”

Genesis 3:11-13; Luke 10:25-29 ¹

On the afternoon of September 3, 1989, Varig Airlines Flight 254 was at Brazil’s Marabá Airport preparing for takeoff on the last leg of a flight from Sao Paulo to Belém. Under normal circumstances the hop to nearby Belém would only take 48 minutes. As he prepared for takeoff, Captain César Garcez consulted a computer-generated flight plan and read the number 0270 which corresponded to the magnetic heading from Marabá to Belém.

Unfortunately, Garcez misunderstood the placement of the decimal point and dialed 270 into the Horizontal Situation Indicator instead of the 027 he should have entered. At 5:45 p.m., flight 254 took off and climbed to an altitude of 29,000 feet, but instead of heading northeast toward the Brazilian coastline and the city of Belém, the plane turned west and headed into the Amazon forest.

The incorrect course caused the setting sun to be directly ahead instead of on the left side of the plane, but neither Captain Garcez nor First Officer Zille seemed to notice this. After a while, when Captain Garcez expected to have visual contact with the Belém airport, his indicators told him that Belém was behind him. Frustrated, the captain made a 180-degree turn, hoping to correct his error. Despite being unsure about where he was, Captain Garcez informed the Varig flight coordinator on the ground that he expected to be landing in Belém in five minutes.

At 7:39 p.m., when the flight was more than an hour overdue, First Officer Zille identified the problem, but the captain didn’t believe it. Finally, after another series of mistakes, Captain Garcez realized that he was going to have to put the plane down in the jungle. Having been notified by the flight attendants that the passengers were wondering what was happening, Garcez lied. He announced that there was a power failure at the Belém airport, and that he would circle the area waiting for the power to be restored. He was actually burning up fuel prior to the crash landing.

At 9:16 p.m., Garcez crash-landed the Boeing 737 in total darkness in a dense tropical forest, 700 miles from his intended destination. Although all six of the crew survived, twelve of the passengers were killed. Both Captain Garcez and First Officer Zille had their commercial licenses revoked. They never flew again.²

Captain Garcez’s efforts to cover his tracks bear a certain similarity to what we saw in our two texts just now. In Luke 10, we read that the man questioning Jesus “*wanted to justify his actions*” rather than taking responsibility for them (10:29). And in the Garden of Eden, when God asked Adam if he had eaten of the forbidden fruit, Adam answered, “*Yes . . . but it was the woman you gave me who brought me the fruit*” (Genesis 3:12). “Yes, but,” “Yes, but,” “Yes, but” . . . and we humans have been bobbing and weaving, ducking and dodging, trying to avoid taking responsibility for what we do, ever since.

How long has it been since you heard someone say, “Yes, it was my fault”? News reports present us with litanies of dodges nearly every day: “It’s not my fault”; “I did nothing wrong”; “I did nothing illegal”; “I misspoke”: “Yes, but,” “Yes, but,” “Yes, but.”

When was the last time you heard about anyone admitting to being in the wrong in a traffic accident? And how often do you think people tell the whole truth about such accidents?

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 4, 2016. The Second Sunday of Advent.

² *The Mercer Island Reporter*, 12.12.02; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Varig_Flight_254

It is a cruel irony of modern life that the only people who can regularly be relied on to claim responsibility for their actions are terrorists.

When Shakespeare's Polonius says farewell to his son in *Hamlet*, he famously concludes, "This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man" (Act I, Scene III).

John Huxley has suggested that were Polonius speaking today, his advice would probably be more along the lines of: "Look after Number 1. Never admit anything. Never say you're sorry, because it implies responsibility. Shift the blame elsewhere. Make excuses. Claim to have been following orders. Get a good PR adviser. Threaten to hire a lawyer."

"There was an age, not so long ago," he wrote, "when politicians actually believed the buck stopped with them; when business leaders led, instead of running for cover at the first sign of trouble; when adults defended the right to take their own risks, make their own mistakes and, more, accepted responsibility when things went wrong; when erring children would be urged to reflect, to ask themselves 'whose fault is it?', to 'own up,' to accept the consequences."³

On this Second Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Penitence, we're considering "responsibility," which is the foundation of penitence. And penitence, which is sorrow growing out of the acknowledgement of guilt, is at the root of Bethlehem's Manger, which was the essential precursor to Calvary's Cross.

Accepting responsibility for bad behavior and bad outcomes is never pleasant, but the good news is that if I have the power and the ability to cause something bad to happen, then I also have the power and the ability to cause something good to happen—and I am responsible to do so. *This is one of the most important of all of life's lessons to learn, and at the same time one of the most difficult.*

Even if our present circumstances are not the result of our own actions, you and I still have the opportunity and the responsibility to do something meaningful with them. Maybe someone cheated you. Maybe you got laid off. Maybe a storm hit your house. Maybe your spouse is irresponsible. Maybe you have a disability. Sure, we'd all like to live storybook lives, but none of us does.

Lots of things that come into our lives are not our fault; but they are still our responsibility. The past is done, and it cannot be undone. You and I have to live in the real world, not an imagined world—and nobody lives in the fantasy world advertisers present to us at Christmas. Nearly every bit of it is fake. But what's not fake is the glad news that Advent is about Immanuel—*God really is with us.*

While researching this message I came across a poignant photo of a young woman in a rowboat, with this caption: "**Because of you**, father, I don't know how to love . . . **and I forgive you.**"⁴ In that powerful sentence this young woman does two things. She describes a painful situation that probably was not her fault; and she takes responsibility for moving forward in a constructive and powerful way out of her brokenness.

The message of Christmas is really very much like that. In Bethlehem's manger, God says to us, "**Because of you**, my Creation is a wreck . . . **and I forgive you.**" When the babe in the

³ John Huxley, "Not My Fault," 10.4.2003;

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/10/03/1064988390645.html>

⁴ <http://postsecret.blogspot.com>

manger became a man, His first recorded words were *“At last the time has come! The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe this Good News!”* (Mark 1:15).

My friends, the reality is that our life here on earth is a test—every single bit of it is a test. The purpose of our life in this world is to develop the character of Jesus so that we’re willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with Him—and that transformation takes place as we make our way through the various choices that face us day by day.

As Jesus put it, *“Unless you are faithful in small matters, you won’t be faithful in large ones. If you cheat even a little, you won’t be honest with greater responsibilities. And if you are untrustworthy about worldly wealth, who will trust you with the riches of heaven?”* (Luke 16:10-11).

Our problem is that we live in a blame-shifting society in which every problem is always someone else’s fault; in which perpetrators masquerade as victims; in which personal responsibility has been replaced by a readiness to lie, to sue, to redirect blame or, worse, to find scapegoats. And on those rare occasions where there is some measure of repentance, it is often of the very-watered-down sort.

You may know that the U.S. Department of the Treasury has a fund called “The Conscience Fund.” It’s for voluntary contributions from people who have stolen from or defrauded our government. Most contributions are anonymous, and one gift makes the problem of partial repentance as clear as can be: “Dear IRS, I have not been able to sleep at night because I cheated on last year’s income tax. Enclosed find a cashier’s check for \$1,000. If I still can’t sleep, I’ll send you the balance.”⁵

My friends, you and I don’t face any situation that the Power of the Risen Christ cannot help us to overcome; and we have not done anything that the Blood of Jesus will not cover—if we accept responsibility for having done it. But there’s one more crucial piece of this penitence thing that Bethlehem’s Babe offers to us, and it’s not an obvious one. Here’s a story that brings it home

A man named Paul wanted to quit using profanity, and he asked William, another man at his church, to become an accountability partner in this effort. Every Sunday, Paul would report to William how many times he had “cussed” during the week, and Paul would put \$5 in the offering place for each incident. The first week cost Paul \$100, but although following weeks saw some improvement, success seemed far away and very expensive.

After the fourth week, William told Paul that he had unilaterally changed the deal for the coming week, but he wouldn’t tell Paul what was different. In response to Paul’s queries, William just said, “Trust me, this is going to cost you both less and more.”

The next Sunday, Paul’s report was still discouraging, and William told him, “Paul, as I told you, this is going to cost you both less and more. It’s called grace.” And William took out a check, made it out to the church, dated and signed it, but left the amount blank. “Paul, your sin still costs, but to you, it’s free. Fill in the amount, and next week there will be more grace.”

That first week of grace cost William \$55. The second week only cost him \$20. And there was no third week. It cost Paul too much to fill in those checks, so he changed his behavior.⁶

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscience_Fund

⁶ Bill White, www.preachingtoday.com

My friends, part of the message of Advent is that the day will come when all excuses will be at an end, and that means that there is some Very Bad News and some Very Good News. Let me give the Bad News First: *“For the word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are. Nothing in all creation can hide from him. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes. This is the God to whom we must explain all that we have done.”* The Bad News is that we will be held accountable.

And here’s the Good News: *“That is why we have a great High Priest who has gone to heaven, Jesus the Son of God. Let us cling to him and never stop trusting him. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it”* (Hebrews 4:12-16) . . . if we take responsibility for our lives and admit our need of forgiveness.

I’m sure you saw that in the “cussing” story, you and I are “Paul,” and Jesus is “William.” Jesus has already paid the price for our sin—for mine, and for yours, and, in the mystery of eternity, our sin continues to cost Him. Could we possibly have a more powerful motivation to turn from our Sin and to cast ourselves upon His Grace?

My friend, do you want this CHRISTmas to be better than ever before? Then turn yourself around, fall down before our Lord Jesus in your heart, and tell Him, “I’m sorry. I’m very sorry. I take responsibility for the mess I’ve made of my life. Please forgive me and help me to become the person You want me to be.”

Like Captain Garcez on that ill-fated flight, it’s hard for us to admit that we’ve messed everything up and that our lives are going in the wrong direction, but that admission is what lies even at this moment between us and the wonders of the Kingdom of God. If you’ll take one step toward the Master, my friend, you’ll find His arms open wide. Run to Jesus. Run to Jesus. Run to Jesus and live!