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This week's scripture readings from Psalm 32 and Luke 15 and the reading for the Lenten candle lighting that we will hear before communion bring together a wide array of images. As I read them this week, it almost felt as though I was walking through an art gallery of images, seeing glimpses of God as I walked through the words and pictures that appeared before my eyes. I felt like a custodian who walks through the gallery in the evening cleaning up after everyone has left, gazing at the pictures as I wandered through the halls of pictures.

This morning I invite you to walk with me through those images and listen to a variety of voices describe their impression of the art.

We begin with the words and imagery in Psalm 32. As I read a portion of words from *The Message Bible* and as you look at the word picture on the screen, what

do you see?

Count yourself lucky, how happy you must be—  
you get a fresh start,

your slate's wiped clean (or your sin is covered up).

<sup>2</sup>Count yourself lucky—  
GOD holds nothing against you  
and you're holding nothing back from him.

<sup>3</sup>When I kept it all inside,  
my bones turned to powder,  
my words became daylong groans.

<sup>4</sup>The pressure never let up;  
all the juices of my life dried up.

<sup>5</sup>Then I let it all out;...

Suddenly the pressure was gone—  
my guilt dissolved,  
my sin disappeared.<sup>1</sup>

Just as in an art gallery while looking at a painting, we may all see different aspects of the same psalm. What do you see? ...

After cleaning up in this part of the gallery, it's time to head to the next portion where the famous painting of the Prodigal Son by Rembrandt hangs. It comes from the familiar story in Luke's Gospel where the younger son asks for his



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inheritance from his father, wanders away and spends his money foolishly, becomes so destitute that he considered eating the food he fed to the pigs, and comes to his senses and returns home. There the son is greeted by his father who welcomes him home and throws a big party, while the older son remains away and pouts that dad never threw him a party even though he stayed home and did what he was supposed to do.

Rembrandt captured the scene when the younger son returned home, and as we stand in the gallery and gaze at the picture, what do you see? ...

One of my favorite authors, Henri Nouwen, happened to come across this painting by Rembrandt. He spent several days looking at the painting, and the experience transformed his spiritual life. In his book about this painting, Nouwen wrote:

Looking again at Rembrandt's portrayal of the return of the younger son, I now see how much

more is taking place than a mere compassionate gesture toward a wayward child.... It seems to me now that these hands have always been stretched out — even when there were no shoulders upon which to rest them. God has never pulled back his arms, never withheld his blessing, never stopped considering his son the Beloved One. But the Father couldn't compel his son to stay home. He couldn't force his love on the Beloved. He had to let him go in freedom, even though he knew the pain it would cause both his son and himself. It was love itself that prevented him from keeping his son home at all cost. It was love itself that allowed him to let his son find his own life, even with the risk of losing it.

Here the mystery of my life is unveiled. I am loved so much that I am left free to leave home. The blessing is there from the beginning. I have left it and keep on leaving it. But the Father is always looking for me with outstretched arms to

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receive me back and whisper again in my ear:  
“You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests.”<sup>2</sup>

In a sense, both Psalm 32 and this story of the son who left home remind us that no matter how much of a mess we make in our lives, God is there to help us clean it up. I think back to the days when I used to teach preschool children. In a classroom with fifteen three to five year olds, you can just image the mess at the end of the day after they have been painting, playing at the water table, building with blocks, or trying on dress-up clothes. Before all the children went home, however, we had cleanup time when everyone helped put away the toys scattered all over the classroom. Inevitably I would hear someone say, “But I didn’t play with that,” as though that was an excuse to not have to help. I would gently explain that I didn’t play with it either, but that I would like the child to help me put it away so that we could play with it again tomorrow. As I began helping put away the toys, the

resistant child would decide to join me in the cleanup process.

Imagine we have just cleaned up the final room



of the art gallery, but before we leave for the evening, we come across one more painting, based on a scene which we will hear echoed in our Lenten

candle lighting ceremony before communion. What do you see? ...

When Jesus met with his disciples for that last meal together, he began by washing their feet. It was common to offer water to travelers on those dusty roads, but Jesus did an amazing thing by actually offering to wash their feet. He helped them clean up along their journey, which reminds us that he continues to help clean our lives. In a sense, he demonstrated the words of Psalm 32: “Count yourself lucky, how happy you must be—you get a fresh start, your slate’s wiped clean.” As we

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continue our journey toward Easter, you may feel as though you are the one in Jesus' parable that wandered away and is looking for the cleansing touch of the father's forgiving love. Or maybe you feel as though you are the one who stayed at home but could not celebrate the return of the lost brother, thereby wishing to experience the cleansing touch of reconciliation.

Wherever you find yourself in the story, God is there, waiting patiently, ready for cleanup time, offering the cleansing forgiveness of God's loving care.

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<sup>1</sup> Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: The Bible in contemporary language* (Ps 32:3-5). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

<sup>2</sup> An Excerpt from *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* by Henri J. M. Nouwen, [www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/excerpts.php?id=21226](http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/excerpts.php?id=21226)