

My aunt and uncle staged an intervention for me over Christmas weekend. There had been warning signs. I had been experimenting, you see, with Karl Rahner; I was hanging with a new crowd of people they didn't recognize, and sometimes my new friends dressed in cassocks or stoles. Most damning: I was taking the Eucharist. In short, I seemed like a Christian convert.

For them, studying philosophy was one thing. It was acceptable as a discipline, respectable, even. But theology? And, heaven forbid, ministry? Didn't I know how awful the Catholic church had been? Didn't I understand that religion was for the weak, the meek, and gullible?

Christmas dinner was an awkward affair. "I don't understand," my aunt said, as she aggressively snapped open a leg of crab. "Priests bless weapons, institutionalized religions promote war and strife, and do I need to bring up the patriarchy? Conversion therapy, Crusades, and the Holocaust! Why would you choose to convert?"

For me, the question has never been why stay. Instead, the question I find myself answering over, and over, and even for myself: Why come at all?

My aunt has a point. The church, regardless of which tradition you're looking at, is full of hypocrisy, moments of violence and cruelty, and a smouldering fervor that is just as likely to scorch a soul as warm it.

So why come?

I think Lot's wife asked the same question. Dragged by angels through the street, literally pushed forward by the hand of God, she still turned back to watch the burning of

her city, the destruction of everything she knew and loved, including her unnamed daughters.

Was it curiosity that turned her back? Fear? Or pride in being spared? She must have struggled with the fear of the future, and there is a morbid comfort in watching the failures of your past drift around you, like ash in the air. But maybe it was vengeance that turned her -- this was the city that had thought of raping her daughters; this was a city that deserved to burn, and deserved her spite.

Perhaps she wished to go back to the plains, stop the burning and save the foundations. It was, after all, her home, the place she had married and raised her family.

Whatever the reason, she turns away from God's command to move forward, she refuses to answer the call; she looks back on the ash and violence, seeking answers from the pain rather than from the path set before her. Her reward is transformation into an unmoving pillar of salt. She is unable to walk back to the city, she can not move forward in faith. She is stuck, forever watching the burnt corpse of her home, with no power to heal it.

For my conversion, it was hard to look at the church and not see the pain it caused and encouraged, not only in the historical past, but in my present. Yes, disordered sexuality. And yes, a woman with a traditionally male vocation. And even, yes, a faith discovered in doubt, not doctrine. So I understand why Lot's wife looks back. I also want to glorify the destruction of corrupted practices, and sift through that destruction, looking for the pieces of myself that I have lost to it. The temptation to turn back is powerful; I understand the desire to focus on the pain, and not the promise.

While asking “why come”, the answer is not “to turn back”. Painful things have happened in every life, some more than others, and answers found in that pain are not going to be a strong enough foundation to build faith on. Instead, they will sap the hope and vitality from your veins, leaving only and bitterness salt.

Dig in new ground, and unearth a different foundation, one whole-er and holier than the wreckage of what came before. This is what we are called for -- this is why we come. When the Hemorrhaging Woman approaches Jesus, she is not focused on her pain. She has already “endured much, under many physicians, and had spent all she had; she has not grown better, but worse”. She does not focus on the past, however painful it might be, she is instead focused on a new future. With her life actually flowing out from her, she still reaches for something new and different, hoping. Her entire being arched God-ward, stumbling through the crowd, sidestepping and searching, entirely determined to reach one thing: wholeness.

When she touches the fringe of Jesus’ clothing, the woman knows she is healed. She has an experience of the real, the more than real. This is what we seek when we attend to the Church, and these experiences sparkle like springs in the desert, the living water that Jesus’ always offers us. But like the woman, we slip back into the crowd. Those moments of realness are terrifying, they’re difficult. They bring peace, yes, but they also bring conflict, fear; they demand that we live in difficult crowds and confrontational communion. It’s easier to hide ourselves than present ourselves, and simpler to privately struggle with our experiences, than come forward as witnesses and workers for God.

But when Jesus calls the woman, she does turn around. In fear and trembling, she takes her place as a disciple, as someone who follows the call of Jesus. This is not Lot's wife turning back, following her own suffering, her own plan. This is a woman, stumbling, unsure, but full of hope, that turns around to follow. Take that as your rallying call. When we turn back to that call, we also move forward and add our lives and stories to communion.

So the original question: Why come at all? Because we are called. There is no other answer than this. The voice calling me to Christ was stronger than any other I knew, resonating in both the brightest and darkest parts of myself, places I could hardly bear to explore alone. But if we listen to that call, we are never alone. If we choose to come, we take our place in the crowd, where our experiences, stories, shadow and flame are added to others. But that also means we have joined a communion where the history is flawed, and the tradition painful, sometimes too much for us to bear. It is difficult to stay, but I offer one more thought.

The church is built on us: our experiences of the more than real. And that demands -- not a denial of the pain and suffering of those around us -- but rather a commitment to hear it and heal it. That commitment demands creativity on our part and steadfast hope, but also a full command of our own identity in the community. "Here I am," declares Mary, "the servant of the Lord", willing to journey or remain, wherever and whatever she is called to be.

Though Mary no doubt suffered, perhaps poverty, certainly persecution and oppression, she nevertheless remained hopeful. As the angel tells her that the impossible

will occur, that she will conceive and bear the Son of the Most High, a savior for her people, she questions. Mary, perhaps like Lot's wife, is full of doubt: "How can this be?" We might as well ask how this snarl of sin -- political, economic, social and simple -- can be untangled and unwound into a single, salvific thread. But the angel's answer, that "nothing is impossible with God", is comforting; we don't need to fully understand the how, we must only trust the why, and say "Let it be with me."

Mary's choice -- to say yes to God's call, to walk forward in faith, even with doubts -- results in the Magnificat. In community with Elizabeth, sharing the struggles of pregnancy with her, Mary composes a prayer real to her lived experience of suffering, while seeking the creative redemption of it. She pledges her commitment to God, praising God's great fidelity to her, and reaffirms God's similar commitment to all the suffering of the lowly, poor, oppressed, and hungry. While Mary has suffered like Lot's wife, she has also responded to God's call like the Hemorrhaging Woman, walking forward in faith to follow. And, even more powerfully, she has chosen to co-create an answer with God, pledging her life to the creative redemption of the suffering she knows and sees.

Mary stays in community with Elizabeth, "remain[ing] with her about three months" before returning home, where she again stays. Mary stays in community, sharing the suffering and stigma that surrounds pregnancy. What allows her to stay is the knowledge that her presence -- her very self, her story and the child she carries -- will radically alter the community, redeeming and saving it from all its errors and pain it had caused.

We are not given the same knowledge. We don't *know* that coming to the church that has spurned will result in redemption. We don't *know* that staying in the church which has

shamed can ever be fully mended. But in our persistent, stubborn hope, we know that we have been given a promise that all things will be made new. And, we can know that with every story we offer the Church and every sorrow we put on the altar, we will all be freer to move one more step toward God.

So. Will you turn back toward pain? Or turn around for the call? Will you remain in the desert, a monument to wreckage and wrath, or will you help birth the living water, through which all things are made new?

Will you answer the call?