



A Return to the Heart

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

The Second Sunday of Advent, December 8, 2019

Turn: Exodus 3:1-6, Luke 5:1-11

I once read something on the national Episcopal Church website that I have not since been able to find when I looked for it, but I swear it was there at one point. It was a sort of Q & A about Episcopal beliefs. One of the questions posed was this: Do Episcopalians believe in being born again? And the answer was: yes, we do. We are born again, and again, and again. I liked that. I don't know if any of you are even familiar with that phrase – “born again.” I grew up with it in a different denomination, and in that context, being “born again” meant that you had to have a moment in time when you decided to invite Jesus into your heart as Lord and Savior. It was understood as the moment in time when you went from the status of being an “unbeliever” to being “saved.” But Episcopalians in general don't think in quite such either / or terms. Of course it's true that we all do have really important moments in our lives when we decide who we are with relation to God and ourselves and our neighbors. We have moments where we need to surrender to the love and life and action of God on a more macro scale. But, it's equally true that every moment in time presents us small choices and challenges and temptations and invitations—and, that in each and every moment, we can choose what our intention is about. We can always begin again. We can always receive the life of God, again.

This beginning again, this being born again, whether it's in big epic moments or small tiny shifts in your attitude, is the heart of the spiritual practice we all “Turn.” If you remember, this fall we've been talking about the seven practices of Jesus' Way of Love: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest. We've been talking about them because they capture, in a simple way, the different aspects of

the journey we call following Jesus. Today's practice is "turn" which is the first practice, even though we are discussing it last. In a certain sense it's a precondition to all the others.

So what does "turn" really mean?

In both of the stories in today's scriptures, the story about Moses and the story of Simon Peter and the other fishermen who become disciples of Jesus, there is a series of small invitations that God makes. Both Moses and Simon accept these small invitations. Moses lets himself get interrupted to go check out the bush that is burning and not consumed, and Simon agrees to host Jesus in his boat even though he must be exhausted from a night of unsuccessful fishing. In both cases, the course of their lives is entirely changed. God calls Moses to go free the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and God gives him everything he needs in order to accomplish this task. Jesus calls Simon and the other fishermen to become disciples, and after seeing evidence of a God who can provide so much fish that it nearly capsizes their boat, they leave everything to follow Jesus. The practice "turn" is about changing the direction our lives are moving in, whether that's a three degree slight course correction or a complete 180. It's about recognizing the active presence of God in our lives and surrendering to what God asks of us, because what God asks is always for the sake of liberation, and healing, and life.

When I was thinking about this practice in my own life, I have certainly had big picture times when I responded to God's overwhelming love in a way that has clearly changed the course of my life, and also times when I ran screaming from anything God-related. I suppose it's worth mentioning that eleven years ago I did not consider myself a Christian or attend church at all, and through a series of completely unexpected shifts I experienced what I would describe as God's healing and now still to my own surprise find myself a priest and the rector of St John's. For me, my original sense of God's call was about healing, because I felt God's healing in a way I did not anticipate at a very dark time in my life. But today, the practice turn feels constant and applicable to the more micro aspects of my life. About a month ago I was meeting with my spiritual director, and life here

at St. John's was pretty stressful for me given what was going on with Shane. She and I were talking about my need to find time for silence and silent prayer, specifically, so that I could ground my thinking and decision-making in the love and light of God's presence and not only in my own problem solving and best efforts. So I ended up asking God to help me find a prayer accountability partner. Well, you should be careful what you pray for—you might actually get it! I ended up asking my neighbor across the street if she might be willing to be this partner with me, because I know she is a person who is very committed to her spiritual journey and her life of faith. So now, three times a week I text her about my experience of silent prayer, and three times a week she texts me.

Here's what's kind of amazing. In the month since we've been doing this, that I've been more consistent about resting in the presence of God in prayer, I've noticed little differences that were unanticipated. My office is getting cleaner, and my house is getting cleaner. On Friday I had lunch with my mother, who voted differently from me in the last election. And we actually had an incredible, heart centered conversation about the impeachment proceedings in a way that did not create more contempt or division between us but also was rigorously honest. The reason I think this was possible is that because of my practice of silent prayer, I was not "willing" all the time. I am remembering how to listen, to God, and to other people as well. I am learning to accept that my own understanding of things might not be all there is to know. These are little things, but I'm sharing them with you in real time because I think the practices of the Way of Love are like a reality show that we have to engage in together; we need to build the bridge while we're walking over it. I'm sharing with you an experience I have been having about an invitation that I sensed from God, and my efforts to respond to that invitation, and the little seeds of life that seem to be sprouting up around me because of it.

So how do you do this? If "turn" means to recognize the presence and invitation of God in your life and to turn toward that, how do we do this?

There was a monk named Thomas Merton who died in 1968. He was a deep practitioner of contemplative prayer. Here is what he says:

“Monastic” [prayer] is a prayer of silence, simplicity, contemplative and meditative unity, a deep personal integration in an attentive, watchful listening of the heart. . . . it is a wordless and total surrender of the heart in silence. . . . We rarely pray with the mind alone . . . This involves the whole person, and proceeds from the center of one’s being. . . . [this] prayer begins not so much with “considerations” as with a “return to the heart,” finding one’s deepest center, awakening the profound depths of our being in the presence of God, who is the source of our being and our life.¹

In the end, I think that the practice “turn” is about a “return to the heart.” It is about becoming supple enough and mindful enough to let go our own agendas and seek the presence and action of God. It is about recognizing that deeper than all of our struggles, depression, anxieties, anger; despite the craziness and division in our culture; deeper than the systemic racism in our country and the separation of children from undocumented parents and gun violence and the exploitation of the earth—deeper than all these things is the ground of our being in God. This God is the one whose will, the scriptures tell us, is for liberating slaves and honoring the earth. This God is the one who loves the stranger and who calls both the innocent and the guilty to healing. This God is the one whose birth we await in Advent, the one who turns despair to hope, who meets us where we are, wherever we are.

The reason we “turn” from practices like mindless addiction to video games or overwork or contempt of those whose political perspectives we violently disagree with is that we trust God is always inviting us to participate in what God is already doing to reconcile all things. When we’re too curved in on ourselves and our own bad habits, we blow right past God’s invitations. When we’re too stubborn and stuck in our own suffering or our own sense of being right we don’t even notice what God is doing in the face of our children or our neighbors or our co-workers.

¹ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (Image Books, 1996) at 5-6.

I'm speaking from my own experience here. The practice turn is about a return to the heart. It is about suspending our best problem solving and thinking, temporarily, to make space to notice what God is up to—and to follow that.

Ironically, the practice turn involves all the other practices. We come here to worship, so that we can learn about scripture and receive the invitation to pray. When we pray we notice what God's invitations are, and we turn toward those. They inevitably invite us to go on journeys, to follow Jesus to the places of the world's pain, and to bless all those around us. Then we rest, knowing that God's work is bigger than us, and that we are called to do our part and then trust God to take care of the whole.

So this week, I invite you to make some space to “return to the heart.” Turn toward the actual presence of God in your life. If you don't know where that is, make some time to reflect and pay attention, because my own assumption is that God is always gently beckoning toward us, inviting us to healing. Turn away from those numbing habits that prevent you from noticing what God is up to. We do not need to find God. God has already found us. God is the ocean we are swimming in. Turn is always a return to who we really are and who we are created to be. Together, let us return to the heart.