



## Turning from, Turning Toward

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn for St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church  
March 1, 2020, the First Sunday in Lent, Exodus 2:11-25 and Matthew 4:1-13*

Today is the beginning of lent. Some of you undoubtedly grew up knowing all about lent, and others I'm sure didn't. Traditionally, people fast, engage in acts that are meant to interrupt selfishness or being curved in on ourselves, and engage more consistently in prayer. Nowadays It's common to "give something up" for lent like chocolate or wine or social media. But here at St. John's, we are going straight to the heart of the matter. We are going to explore the spiritual practice we call "turn." Turn is about a change in direction. It's about recognizing where we are headed is not working, and that we get to choose a different way, with God's help.

On Wednesday we started lent with Ash Wednesday, when we marked our foreheads with ashes as a way to remind ourselves that we are finite, we are mortal, and life does not last forever. That might sound a little bleak, but actually it's liberating. We don't have forever to align our thoughts and actions with our values. We don't have forever to express to our loved ones how important they are to us. We don't have forever to do the thing we sense burning in our

spirits is ours to do, because God's Spirit is agitating in there and calling us to something new.

So lent is a time for radical and loving honesty with ourselves. It's about being honest about who we are called to be, and how we actually live. This isn't to shame ourselves or just to feel helpless or bad. Quite the opposite. It's to realize that all the power of God, the love of God, exists to help us change, because God wants healing for us and for the world.

In today's story about Moses, he was engaged in a massive change. He had been born a slave, rescued from the Pharaoh's genocide by his courageous daughter, and raised with privilege as an Egyptian. For the first time, he decides to go visit his own people, the Hebrew slaves. He engages the spiritual practice "go", which is one of the seven marks of what is distinctive about following the Way of Love. So he goes, and he comes face to face with the ugly brutality of slavery. I wonder if he had heard his whole life about slavery. But maybe this was the first time he saw its impact on an actual human being. He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave. In the original language the word for "beating" here is the same word for "kill," "ravage," and "destroy." We're not talking about being backhanded on the face. We're talking about awful violence that is enough to kill a person. And Moses just reacts. He kills the Egyptian.

The next day, apparently Moses is on a roll, because he goes to visit his kin again, and sees two of the slaves fighting each other, and he tries to intervene against the one who in his judgment was in the wrong. And when he realizes everyone knows he killed the Egyptian the day before, he becomes a refugee and goes across the Red Sea to the country of Midian. Once he gets there he fights on behalf of the shepherd women who are being consistently shut out by the other shepherds at the well. It seems that he can't help himself; he seems to be a person who is always standing up for someone being bullied or oppressed. But his best efforts have just landed him in exile in the desert, a refugee, a foreigner, having accomplished nothing for all his efforts. Moses' power, as good as his intentions had been, was not yet aligned with the power and call of God. I imagine he felt something like despair and helplessness. He still cared about his people and could do nothing to save them.

This week one of the women that I run with shared with our group that her sister works in the Molson Coors complex in Milwaukee where the shooting happened this past week. Thank God her sister was safe. But my friend said she felt so helpless and angry and sad. Five of the people her sister worked with didn't get to go home. I imagine that if we are honest, many of us also feel helpless about this and many other things happening in our country right

now. We might also feel helpless about things closer to home, like how compassionate we're able to be with a family member who has a mental health diagnosis, or whatever else you struggle with. Like Moses we might be tempted to react. I surely hope there are some Moses characters among us, some folks who can't not stand up for people who are being bullied and oppressed. But despite all our best efforts, to take on the empire or chronic anxiety or even just our own addiction to screens can feel like a mosquito taking on a grizzly bear. In today's gospel reading Jesus also goes to the desert, like Moses, and Jesus also comes to the end of his own resources—and is tempted by hunger, and the attempt to force God's hand, and the allure of power.

And so what brings about a turn? What brings about change? I love what brings about change in today's reading from Exodus. At the end of the reading, the cry of the Hebrew slaves comes to God. God sees, God hears, God remembers, God takes note. In some of my conversations with people about this reading this past week, some folks thought, why didn't God hear their cries before? It's an excellent question. But I also wonder whether the Hebrews had ever been able to voice their anguish before. Perhaps they had been silent in face of their oppression. It's much safer to be silent, and I wouldn't blame them. The empire prefers silence. But somehow,

when Pharaoh died and there was a change in leadership, perhaps they realized that not even monsters live forever, and perhaps they discovered a spark of hope within them, and with their hope, they came face to face with their own anguish, and so they cried out for help. And God heard them.

Walter Brueggemann is a prominent scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures, and here's what he says about this:

The first task of every [marginalized] community is to find its voice when it has had its voice, wind, and identity knocked out of it. God is a crucial agent in the story of liberation, but is second and not first.... The world of Exodus is where the holiness of God lives in staggering response to the hurt of the slaves.<sup>1</sup>

We shall see what happens next in the story of Exodus, next week. But for today, this first Sunday in lent, it's enough to see that in our helplessness, in the temptation to despair because our best efforts have achieved nothing, we can and should cry out to God. Those of us who have been marginalized or silenced can find our voice. Those of us who if we're honest are more like Egypt than Israel in this scenario can learn to listen very deeply to what marginalized

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Exodus Commentary, *New Interpreter's Bible* vol. 1 (Abingdon Press, 1994), at 705.

communities are saying and recognize that the God of scripture is a God who cares about oppression.

Moses made the choice to intervene on behalf of the marginalized, and it made him an outsider. Jesus too made choices that ended up making him a feared outsider. The church has a vocation in times like this, and its vocation is about aligning with the power of God to break cycles of violence because we believe the kingdom of God is real and not a fantasy. If we do this, we will likely feel and be perceived to be more like outsiders than citizens. Brueggemann says, “the church does not need to give up its “imperial status” [when] in the company of the Egyptians. But whenever it acts in its passion for ‘the Hebrew,’ it accepts its own fugitive vocation.”<sup>2</sup>

So this first Sunday in Lent, when we turn the light of Christ inward and look honestly at ourselves, let me ask you this. What do you feel helpless about changing, in yourself and in the world? Whose voices are you hearing? What is God inviting us to turn from, and what is God inviting us to turn toward?

Terrible things like the Milwaukee shooting happened this week, but amazing things happened this week as well. St. John’s people went to their respective party caucuses and advocated for

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

wise policies related to climate change, because the earth has no voice and cannot speak for itself. St. Nicholas Episcopal Church in Richfield, which has a strong latinex community and Spanish speaking service, has invited our Lenten small groups to go and exchange stories with them, to begin to get to know some immigrants who aren't at the border but who are our Episcopal brothers and sisters a few miles southeast of us. We can try to hear their voices as God does.

This Lent, let us have courage to turn. To turn from silence, and listening primarily to the voices of empire. To turn toward the love of God, and accept the church's vocation as an outsider called to interrupt cycles of violence. To turn toward the voices of those who cry out for help, and discern how God's Spirit calls us to act. Amen.