

The fourth Sunday in Lent, 14 March 2010

Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR

The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

We experience our entire lives as a spiritual journey, which is why we make Lent our annual special, intentional journey through the wilderness toward our home with God. We hope each year, as it says on our Corporate Prayer handouts, to 'deepen our intimate relationship with God.' Some years we move farther than others, but the result is cumulative. This is the fourth Sunday in Lent, so we have passed the half-way point and it is appropriate that today we hear all about turning points.

In that first short reading from Joshua, we are with the Israelites at Gilgal, on the plain of Jericho. They have finally made it out of the wilderness and crossed the Jordan into the home of God's promise. It is time for rejoicing and celebration. And it is the end of the manna, a turning point. Now they have a home, a place where they can grow their own food, and be responsible to care for others. They are no longer nomads, so they have to discover new ways of organizing their lives to live into this new reality. It is a challenge and an occasion for celebration.

There are several turning points in the Prodigal Son story:

- First the Prodigal Son recognizes his need and decides to go home. This is a major about-face. He had thought himself free and self-sufficient, and now he realizes that he cannot fend for himself, however much bounty his father has given him. He recognizes his neediness, but he does not despair. He could easily have just sat there among the pigs, pitying himself, and surrendering to death. But as he casts off the illusion of self-sufficiency he remembers his father. The memory gives him hope and calls him home.
- Then the father, who has been grieving for his younger son, but still carrying on a good and responsible life with his older son, sees the returning son from far off. He drops everything and runs out along the road to envelope his son in a welcoming embrace. He experiences this as a tremendous turning point, from grief to joy, from daily labor to celebration, from death to life. He does not pause even a moment before accepting this new opening.
- Then the older son, who has been living as the only son, the faithful one, trying to fill the hole his brother left in their family work and in his father's heart, finds that his brother has returned and life is completely changed. Now his brother is home and whole new relationships begin for everyone.

Turning points are opportunities. They provide us with choices. We can choose to ignore them, to try to continue on the same path, but that generally fails. The Israelites cannot live as they did in the wilderness – there is no more manna. They have to embrace this new way of living, or not live at all. Similarly, the prodigal cannot continue as he was without starving. The father could have ignored the son, and gone on as before, but

his heart will not let him. The older son might want to act as if his brother had never returned, but he is there and has been embraced by their father. Reality has changed, so he must change.

Beyond the choice between ignoring and accepting the turning point, there are also choices about how to respond.

- The Israelites could choose to ignore God and move into an illusion of self-sufficiency in this abundant land. This proves to be a major temptation for many years. They are offered a new way to live with God, but many choose a new way to live without God. Turning points are often like this, giving us the freedom to choose between a deeper, richer, more demanding spiritual life and a life of physical plenty in a spiritual vacuum.
- Once he recognized the turning point, the need to do something in order to survive, the prodigal could have clung to his own pride and chosen not to go home, but to find a way to stave off starvation by robbery or some other means.
- Once he saw him on the return path, the father could have chosen to wait at the door with anger in his heart, to let his son grovel at his feet and then to punish rather than forgive him, to demand that he work as a slave for enough years to pay off the money he squandered, to humiliate him in front of the whole community.
- Having seen the celebration for his returned brother, the older brother is so far choosing the negative path, the path of anger and rejection, of hurt pride and withdrawal. We do not know whether he will eventually embrace the turning point, whether he will come in to the party and welcome his brother home, rejoicing in the restoration of their family. He is free to choose and with time may make the positive choice.

When turning points lead us toward God, when they are course-corrections on our Godward journey, they are always occasions of celebration. The Israelites at Gilgal are having a great celebration of gratitude and new life. The household of the prodigal have a grand ‘welcome home’ party. The closer we move toward the heart of God, the closer we are to joy.

In the epistle, Paul tells us, “from now on, we regard no one from a human point of view.” In the Lenten Bible Study we keep seeing that contrast in Jesus’ parables. We humans want justice and fairness: good people rewarded and bad people punished; hard workers earning more than lazy ones or latecomers. And on and on.

This is the human point of view, wanting predictability, fairness, what we call justice, everything carefully measured out. We look at the world this way because we look at things with a sense of scarcity and limit, the human point of view.

Christ challenges us to move beyond that to the divine point of view, the viewpoint of infinite love and abundance. We can never run out of forgiveness, out of love, out of blessing. At each turning point we discover a choice between a way that makes sense from the human point of view opposed to one that makes sense from the divine point of view. And the divine choice, the choice for life, in the language of the Pentateuch, is always an occasion of celebration.

In the parable the father runs out onto the road and embraces the wastrel, wandering son and draws him into new life and celebration, just as Paul tells us that God sends us out. “God has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation ... we are ambassadors for Christ ...”

What does that mean in our daily lives? What does this pattern tell us about recognizing turning points and the choices they offer?

First, we know that whenever any change happens in our lives, however negative it appears, there is an opportunity to choose life, to choose the divine point of view. There is also an opportunity to choose the human point of view, which will lead us away from joy and celebration. And it can be difficult to know. The prodigal was not expecting joy and celebration when he returned home; he was merely hoping for survival.

We are all grateful for the image of the prodigal and the promise it contains that God’s love for us is inexhaustible, no matter what terrible things we do. But I suspect that most of our turning points are more like the older brother’s than the prodigal’s.

We are settled into our lives, into our patterns of work and worship, of discipline and relationship. We are doing our best, one foot in front of the other, building our community and our relationship with God. Then something happens, something unexpected which disrupts our pattern. Perhaps it seems really unfair. Someone new is getting all the love and attention. Our favorite tasks are taken away. Our established relationships are disrupted by death, by new people, by changes, by illness. We can choose to let our sense of fairness be outraged, to nurture our resentment. We can demand our just deserts or withdraw into ourselves and pout.

Or we can embrace the new situation. We can welcome new people bringing new energy and new life. We can welcome a rest or look for new things to do. We can find delight in the generosity and abundance of God which is always drawing people in, making new things happen.

When we find ourselves at a turning point, we can try to take time to recollect, to remember the Father who loves us and wants to embrace us. In the confidence of that loving embrace we are more likely to make a good choice, the choice congruent with the heart of God.

Paul reminds us that everyone who is in Christ is a new creation, is reconciled to God, and by the same token reconciled with other people. God in Christ binds us together and into himself so that we in turn may

nurture others into this life-giving relationship. And this is done, as it was done in ancient Israel, with patience and struggle, with stories and common memory, and with the constant faithful presence of God.

Whatever choices we make, we remember that the journey continues with ever more turnings. If we turn away from our true selves and from the God who loves us, he will leap out ahead along our road and offer another turning, another choice, so that one day we will find our way home to the celebration.

We refer to our gatherings for worship as celebrations. Each time we gather we are welcomed with joy, no matter how we may have gone astray since the last time we were here. This is a place for us to remember that perpetual welcome for ourselves and everyone. This is a place to which we can bring the hurt and the lost, the starving and the lonely. As ambassadors for Christ, we welcome everyone into our celebration, because in God's economy there is more than enough for everyone: enough love, enough forgiveness, enough bread, enough family, and enough work to do.