

Turn

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Jonah 3:1-5; Mark 1:14-20
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
January 24, 2021

When a person or a person's small child is baptized, they are asked several questions. This morning, I want us to consider the first two questions they are asked. The first question is, "Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?" Then they are asked, "Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?"

(1) Do you turn away from sin and evil? (2) Do you turn to Jesus Christ?

At its heart, *baptism is a matter of turning*. To whom are we turning? Which direction are we facing? Which direction are we going? How have we gotten turned around?

Turning is the core move of the Christian spiritual life.

Two moves: Do you turn away from sin and evil? Do you turn to Jesus Christ?

What is so interesting, and so important for us to realize, is how both of these moves are crucial, and we need to consciously engage both of them. Because it is possible for us to try to have one without the other. If we try to turn away from sin, but are not turning to Jesus, then we may drop into a kind of heavy moralizing that is very keen on pointing out everything that is wrong, but we will not live with the grace and the loving help that flows to us from Jesus. We will insist on the things that are wrong, but we will not avail ourselves of the graces, the help, and the hope that God wants to give us. On the other hand, if we want to turn to Jesus, but without turning away from the broken and sinful patterns of behavior that keep us from being free, if we have not reached a point of readiness to step away from the addictive acts that are keeping us stuck, then we are really just looking to slap a religious label on the surface of our lives, without allowing Jesus to heal us from the inside out.

We need to turn away from sin and evil, and we need to turn to Jesus Christ, to trust in his grace to lead us forward. *Turning is the core move of the Christian spiritual life*. How do you need to turn around in your life?

Both of these moves – the turn away from sin and the turn to Jesus – are given in our two texts today that Leslie just read for us, and these texts show us both the possibilities and the challenges that we face in turning.

The little book of Jonah in the Old Testament – only four chapters long – is a powerful and delightful story, in part because it is so easy to see ourselves in it. Jonah is often called the 'reluctant prophet' of the Old Testament, because God summoned him to speak a message to the Ninevites, the people and leaders of Nineveh – which was the

capital city of the Assyrian empire, a brutal and cruel empire that had oppressed, and was hated by, the Israelites – and Jonah didn't want to do it. So right away, we've got a couple of points of immediate contact with the story of Jonah. If there's anyone or any group of people in the world who make your skin crawl, who get under your skin, who you think are irresponsible, wrong-headed, and dangerous – and in our polarized society and world, it may be that one thing that we've all got in common is that there may be people that we think those kinds of things about – then you've got a decent idea of how Jonah felt about the Ninevites.

And, if you've ever resisted doing something that you knew deep down you really needed to do, if you've ever known in your heart that there was a conversation you needed to have, or an action that God wanted you to take, you knew it was the right thing for you to do, but you kept finding excuse after excuse after excuse not to do it, then you've got a decent idea about how Jonah felt about responding to God's call. He did not want to do it. Didn't want to go to the Ninevites, didn't want to preach God's message to them.

So there's this whole scene at the beginning of the book where Jonah ends up getting swallowed by a great fish, which may seem like a pretty threatening move for God to make on someone, but the belly of the fish turns out to be a transformative moment of grace for Jonah, and when he emerges from the fish – and seriously, how often do you get to use that phrase in your life, "I emerged from the fish" – when he gets spewed out from the fish into our text in chapter 3, he reluctantly goes to Nineveh and speaks the message to them: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" One sentence. That's all. That's the sermon. No 3 points and a poem here. One sentence of warning and judgment.

And then the text says that "the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and everyone – great and small – put on sackcloth." Fasting and sackcloth were rituals of repentance, ways of acknowledging one's sin, ways of turning away from wicked and destructive behavior. The people of Nineveh repented of their sin.

Now you may have noticed that Jonah did not actually say anything about turning away from wickedness and evil. He did not actually say anything about turning to the grace of God. All he said was "forty days more and it's over"! But the story suggests that God can even use a reluctant, rather mean-spirited, one-sentence, judgmental message to bring about newness of heart and change in people. And part of the message of Jonah for the people of Israel is that, if the hated Ninevites can turn away from their sin, you can, too. What a story.

In our gospel reading from Mark 1, Jesus comes to Galilee and preaches his own one-sentence message: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Now you can feel the ways that Jesus' message is more invitational, and has more hope and possibility in it than Jonah's message of doom. But at its heart, it is the same summons to turn, and go in a different way. This is what we sang about in our opening hymn today: "Will you come and follow me, if I but call your name?"

Will you turn away from the fear and the grasping and the manipulation and the worrying that has characterized your life? So many of us have been doing these things for so long, that we may wonder if there's any other way to live. We may have been grasping for people's approval for so long that we may think that's the only thing we know how to do. We may have been trying to control and manage other people's reactions for so long that we may think that's the only way to live. We may have been chasing some addictive behavior for so long that we can't imagine living without it. We may be scared to live without it. But Jesus is telling the early disciples, and he is telling us, that we won't just be turning into an empty void when we turn away from those ways of living. We can turn from them and look into the loving face of Christ. He will show us a better way. He will walk with us into a better way.

Turning is the core move of the Christian spiritual life. Turn away from evil and turn to Jesus. Over and over and over. To let go of wickedness, let go of sin, let go of control, let go of fear, let go of violence, let go of bitterness, let go of fretting and worry. Turn to Jesus, turn to love, turn to justice, turn to trust, turn to simplicity, turn to honesty, turn to forgiveness. Turning is the basic move of the Christian life.

And this is not a move that we make once for all. We don't make this decision to turn once, and then we're finished. Now there may well be one crucial moment, one life-altering choice and decision. There may be one moment, especially if we have been deeply enmeshed in an addictive behavior or in a pattern of wrongdoing, when we decide, "I'm going to live differently. I'm going to let Jesus lead me in a new direction." There may be one moment that turns the tide. But we should not underestimate the gravitational force field of sin. We should not underestimate the seductive power of addiction to draw us back in. This is why the recovery movement talks about doing this 'one day at a time.' Over and over and over again, we turn away from sin and we turn to Jesus Christ. And in case it isn't clear, we don't keep turning in order to keep God happy with us, to keep God on our side. God's already on our side. We don't need to constantly refresh our relationship with God to keep God happy with us. God is always turned with grace and love towards us. We do this to turn ourselves back to God, to keep ourselves on God's side.

Where in your life do you need to turn towards God? Where do you need to turn to Jesus Christ? How have you gotten turned around? We can ask ourselves, "Where in my life am I turning towards fear and sin? Is it in issues having to do with money, with time, with how I relate to my family, with how I relate to the poor, with how I relate to my enemies? How am I turning towards fear, and where do I need to turn towards Jesus and follow him?" When we are turned towards Jesus, we will experience a kind of steadiness, even in the midst of turbulence, disapproval, and conflict. We can be in the midst of a storm, engaged with the elements of that storm, but doing so from a place of stillness, trust, and steadiness of heart. Turning is the core move of the Christian spiritual life. Over and over and over. To God and to God alone be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.