



Turning Point – Touchpoint for May 17, 2023

Luke 24:44-53 (NRSVUE) ⁴⁴ Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

⁴⁸ “You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. ⁵² And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, ⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations...”

Our Bible passage for today is from the appointed readings for the celebration of the Ascension of our Lord day. It's not something we celebrate much anymore. Perhaps we've become too intellectual to get anything out of it... and that is our loss. We focus on the nouns and the facts of the story, rather than the verbs and the relationships. We think it quaint that Jesus went up to heaven, but now knowing the world is round, 'up' is a relative term from one side of the globe to the other.

But there is something more going on here. There is a statement being made about this Jesus and the ongoing work of God in the world.

The work of God in the world is not limited to Jesus. The work of God moves beyond him. There is a great line in the Book of Acts story about the Ascension, where Jesus has gone up into heaven and the disciples are standing there staring up into space, and two men approach them and say:

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?”

I think the same question can be asked of us. “Why do we stand staring out into space, thinking we are gazing upon Jesus?” And why do we think the point of our faith journey is to stare at Jesus?

There is something more. The work, the gospel, the proclamation continues beyond this person who walked the earth. The work, the gospel, the proclamation continues. God is not done with the world once Jesus leaves.

Jesus is not the end, the final point. Rather, Jesus points to something greater. I have said it before, and at the risk of being a heretic I will say it again: I believe we have a tendency to practice Jesus idolatry in the Church. We see Jesus as the end game. The final act. And all we are responsible for doing is coming to

some kind of conclusion, some kind of decision about him. And then maybe forcing that same kind of conclusion or decision on others. And then we are done with them.

But like the disciples, there needs to be some kind of turning point that moves us in a different direction... stops us from just staring into space. The Ascension is just such a moment for the disciples. It is a turning point, a change in direction for the disciples' faith journey. Jesus is not the end game. A Spirit is promised. The disciples, worried about Jesus leaving and being left alone, are given the promise of the Holy Spirit. They can now turn around and face the world without Jesus physically with them.

Now, not even Jesus sees himself as the end game. Our Luke passage makes it clear that even Jesus doesn't see himself as the end game when he says:

"Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations..."

Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations.

This is the end game. The world is forgiven. Nations are forgiven. You are forgiven. God is a gracious and forgiving God. God forgives. The gap between humanity and God is forever closed.

Now I don't want to turn this reflection into a classroom lecture, but we really need to look at this word 'repentance,' because it is widely misunderstood and widely misused.

The most common misunderstanding of the word repentance is that it means to feel sorry, feel bad, feel regret or remorse. But this misses the mark. I mean, think about it. If this is the meaning of repentance, then when Jesus says:

"Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

He would mean:

"Feel sorry, remorse and guilt, because the kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

HUH? WHAT??? That certainly doesn't sound like good news, does it?

The Greek word 'metanoia' is a combination of two words: 'meta,' which means 'beyond' or 'different,' and 'noia,' which means 'to perceive, to think, or the result of perceiving or observing.'

When they combine together it means, 'to think differently after.'

"To think differently after." In other words, repentance isn't so much something we do as much as it is something that is done to us.

It's that old pesky subject, verb, object thing. We think repentance is something in which we are the subject, our activity is the verb, and God or something else is the object. But in reality, repentance is something that has God as the subject, God's activity as the verb, and us as the object.

Repentance is something that happens to us. It is something that changes us. God acts and we are changed. God acts and we see things differently. God acts and we turn around. Some people have said the word 'metanoia' means to turn around, but I think a better phrase would be 'turning point.'

Repentance is a turning point that comes into our lives, and we think differently after. That's why when you hear Jesus talk about repentance, it is always with something added.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Well that would be a turning point, don't you think? If the kingdom of heaven is at hand, that just might turn me around, or make me think differently about my world.

In other words, I don't repent so the kingdom of God will come to me. I turn around because the kingdom of God is coming to me and at me.

“Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations...”

Proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Well, that would be a turning point as well. If I know there is forgiveness, then there is hope. A different future is available. The knowledge of forgiveness of sin turns me around to see a new way of living.

Luther, in his commentary on Genesis, muses on why Adam and Eve hide from God after sinning. Why don't they just come out and greet God? Luther says it's because they don't know what kind of God they have. They can't turn around, or repent, or think differently and come out to God because they don't know whether God will punish, destroy, terrorize or forgive. If you don't know what kind of God you have, you will keep running away from God.

So it is only in the proclamation of forgiveness of sin, only in the announcement that the kingdom of God is at hand, in all its grace and mercy... only in this pronouncement can we be turned around – repented on, as it were.

In other words, repentance isn't so much something we do as much as it is something that is done to us.

Let me give you an example. Many years ago when I was trying to get this concept across to a women's bible study group, one woman – our church treasurer – said, “I think I get it.” Now I should tell you that Alice, our church treasurer, was not the softest nor most gentle person I have ever met. There was, to put it nicely, a hard edge to her.

And she shared this story: “It's like the other night, and it was late, and I was trying to get the monthly report done for the church council meeting, and the numbers weren't adding up, and I was getting frustrated. I was sitting in our spare bedroom where my desk is. Now, my desk is up against the window. And the light is on in the room behind me, and because it is dark outside, I see the reflection of the room behind me in the window right in front of me.

“Now I look up and I can see my husband, Bill, standing in the doorway in the reflection. He doesn't know I see him. And I don't have time for him at the moment because the stupid numbers aren't adding up, so I ignore him. Five minutes later I look up into the window reflection and he is still there... only now he has moved inside the door and is standing against the wall in the room. Again, I don't have time for him because the numbers aren't adding up and the council meeting is the next day, so I ignore him. Five

minutes later I see he is still standing there, and I can't take it anymore so I whip around and yell, 'What is it, Bill? What do you want? Can't you see I'm busy? What is it?'

"And Bill says, 'I'm sorry, I didn't want to bother you, but I just wanted to come in and tell you I love you before I go to bed.'"

You see, repentance isn't so much something we do as much as it is something that is done to us...

You and I go about our daily lives. We get frustrated, confused, irritated. Things don't add up. The world doesn't make sense. Yeah, we know God is hanging around, but really, who has time to think about that? There are other things to figure out. More pressing things. We've got problems to solve.

Sometimes we just want to whip around and say, "What is it God? What do you want? Can't you see I'm busy figuring out my life?"

And God simply replies, *"I just wanted you to know I made a meal for you, a little bread and a little wine. Especially for you. Even in the midst of your betrayals, denials, and falling short, I just wanted to let you know that I love you. I forgive you. And I and my kingdom will always be with you."*

You see, repentance isn't so much something we do as much as it is something that is done to us.

And now, like the disciples, we can turn around and go back into the world with hope, instead of staring blankly into space.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Song

Be Still

(London Fox Taizé Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

Calm Me Lord

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.

Still me Lord, keep me from harm.

Let all the tumult within me cease.

Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Come Drink of Living Water

(London Fox Taizé Choir)

Come drink of living water. Never thirst again.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(Monastery Choir of St. John of San Francisco)

Benediction

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

(National Lutheran Choir, Peter C. Lutkin)

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord lift his countenance upon you... and give you peace.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you... and be gracious unto you.

The Lord be gracious unto you. Amen.