

The Great Turnabout

It was time to repaint the church. The paint had been bought and the work crew assembled. But the evening before, the pastor, wanting to save a little money, had added paint thinner to the paint to get it to go a little further. Unfortunately, it proved to be a false economy because, in his frugal enthusiasm, he thinned the paint too much. The next day, the paint job ended up being streaky and not covering at all well. The pastor was distraught, and went to his office and prayed, "Lord, you've seen the mess. What should we do?" There was silence ... and then came the voice: "Repaint, repaint and thin no more."

OK, I hear the groans. I feel your pain. My apologies to those of you who invited friends on this Bring a Friend Sunday – no doubt telling them about the high standard of preaching we have here at St Tim's. And on top of it all, there's this heavy message, right out of the chute, in our Bible readings: "Unless you repent, you too will all perish." Some of you with good memories may be thinking, "Ah yes. The last time Pastor Jim preached on a Bring a Friend Sunday he preached on Hell."

I want to say this is all Pastor Dan's fault – but I can't, really. As I think most of you know, we, like many churches, follow a three-year cycle of texts here, which is generally a good thing because it tends to keep pastors off of their hobby horses and into a wider range of texts in the Bible. Yet sometimes – especially on Bring a Friend Sundays, it seems – we get texts that have us chewing on our lips a bit. But we go with them – we go with them – because, as we move through the Bible over a three year period, we as pastors have again and again been surprised at what God does with those texts. And you probably have been, too. It's God's Word, after all.

"Unless you repent, you too will all perish." That's what Jesus says – twice – in our Gospel reading. And, like me, you may have an image in

mind – a more modern image – an image of the haggard, bearded guy with sunken eyes on the street corner carrying the sign with “Repent” or “Prepare to meet your God” written on it.

But image and reality are often quite different; the reality is this: God wants his best for you, as the Bible reminds us again and again. Those cartoon images of God in the clouds ready to pitch lightning bolts just don’t get it. God wants his best for you – he really does. The Bible is clear about this. So, that being said, where does all this repentance talk fit in?

We may think of groveling, of sackcloth and ashes, but that word “repentance” in the Bible – whether Old Testament or New – literally means a great turnabout. A turning around, a change of mind or direction, a return to where you should have been all along. Oh, indeed, the word sometimes causes a bit of discomfort. Think of going to your doctor. It’s been said that your pastor sees you at your best, your lawyer at your worst, but your doctor as you really are. And it can be uncomfortable when your doctor measures you, weighs you, pokes you and says, “You need to change your diet and get some exercise.” I mean, you knew that all along, right? You didn’t have to pay a doctor 150 bucks to tell you that. But – really – you did. We need that word from our doctor that makes us get real with ourselves. Good grief, we even *pay* for that word even though it makes us uncomfortable – because we know it’s what we really do need to hear.

When you first came in, you saw a verse from the prophet Isaiah on the wall: Isaiah 55:6: “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.” Isaiah was a prophet, many many years ago before there was a Bible. Think about it; how did God first get the conversation going? How did he first speak to people before there was a Bible? He spoke one-on-one through people like Isaiah – through prophets and others – people whose words later *became* the Bible. And in our first lesson Isaiah brings a message fresh as the morning paper and as old as

people's chasing after empty things:

Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.

Sounds a bit like your doctor getting on you for your diet – but of course the issue is even bigger, and Isaiah goes on:

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

"Let him *turn* to the LORD." The Old Testament is written in Hebrew, of course, and the Hebrew word translated "turn" here is elsewhere translated "repent." *That's* what repenting is all about. A great turn-about. "Let the wicked forsake his way Let him turn to the LORD" – let him "repent" to the LORD, if you will. For when that happens, we read, God "will have mercy on him" and "will freely pardon."

It's that simple and that profound. No threats of lightning bolts, no groveling or sackcloth and ashes. Wherever you find yourself today, whatever you've done, God lays that offer of mercy and pardon before you. And when we respond and say, "*that* doesn't make sense; there's gotta be a catch," God replies, as he does in the very next verse in Isaiah,

my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways; as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

So there you have it. Repentance in a nutshell. The great turnabout; and a God who freely forgives and pardons because his thoughts and ways are quite different from our thoughts and ways.

Now fast forward the tape to the time of Jesus. Five hundred years after Isaiah said those words, nothing had changed. Except for one major thing: God had now shown just how much his thoughts and ways differ from ours by taking on human flesh and entering the world as one of us. As Jesus. God with skin on, as a child once put it. And, not

surprisingly, the people still didn't get it. Didn't get how this moment, this exclamation point dropped into the middle of human history, was God's way of providing that pardon Isaiah spoke of. Because Jesus, God-with-skin-on, took upon himself the sentence – for you, for me. Because that exclamation point had a crossbar and Jesus hung from it.

Just before our Gospel reading, Jesus had been trying to get people on board; trying to get them to see what significant times they were living in because of his presence. Like Isaiah, he challenged them to seize the day, to know the mercy and pardon God offered. And what do they do? They try to change the subject. Well, don't we all? When God starts pointing at us, like Uncle Sam in the "I want you" poster, we start pointing at everyone else. Divert the attention, and all that. "Ah, right, Jesus, that's cool," they say. "Hey, did you hear about how that butcher Pontius Pilate killed those folks in Galilee who were making sacrifices to God? Now *there's* some folks that must have really messed up big time before God – even more than *we* have."

And Jesus, who was admittedly not a soft, new-agey 90s male, comes right back with, "So you think those folks were worse sinners than others because they suffered like that? Not at all! But unless you repent, you'll face a similar fate." This does two things. First, he shows Pat Robertson's infamous comment about Haiti's earthquake being God's punishment for their sins to be simply wrong, wrong, wrong. There are many things we could say about God and Haiti – or Chile – but that's not one of them. That's the first thing Jesus' words get settled.

But second, he pulls them right back from their attempt to distract, pulls them back to that turnabout word "repentance." Back where we started. Because God really does want the very best for you and won't let you or me start changing the subject – any more than your doctor would let you get away with starting to talk about how overweight your neighbor has gotten lately.

So what does it look like up close, this repentance thing? What might it look like in your life or mine? Let me tell you a story. A man had been married for 20 years. It had been a good marriage – wonderful wife, two kids, a house, nice neighborhood. But one day a new woman showed up at the office, and they really hit it off. They talked a lot, went to coffee together, nothing more. But then things moved along and they started wondering about other possibilities. And so The Plan had come about. He often traveled. His wife would certainly not question another business trip over the weekend. And so they carefully worked on The Plan. They would meet at a hotel in a city about three hours away by car. Nice location, no one knew them there. Zero chance of ... complications.

The day came. His bag was packed, he tossed it in the back seat, kissed his wife good-bye – that was a bit of an awkward moment, but it passed. And then he took off. As he drove, he thought about what he was about to do. Thought about the women at both ends of the road he was driving; worked it through; was actually rather pleased with the way things were turning out. It was a fine day for a drive, and as the miles of highway rolled away in the rear view mirror so his mild anxiety began to recede as well.

He'd been driving for about two hours when his car phone rang. He looked at the caller ID display in the dash: unknown caller – let it go. But then he decided to take the call – and with the push of a button the whole day suddenly changed. There had been an accident; details were unclear; but his wife was in the hospital, in ICU with serious injuries. How soon could he get there?

At this point, his whole world was suddenly turned around. He loved his wife; he'd only been planning a little outing, a little something on the side. But now he was suddenly struck by the enormity of what he'd been planning to do. Context. Perspective. How could he have gotten involved in something like this; how could he have put at risk something

so precious to him – something that was now indeed at risk many miles behind him.

In his anxiety, he managed to get his car across the center divider without causing an accident, and he headed back down the other side of the freeway, headed back to home. At this point, everything – *everything* – was now different. The great turnabout. All that had been on his left was now on his right; everything formerly on his right was now on his left. That which had been before him and had been drawing him ahead was now behind him and actually driving him away. And that which had been behind him, which he had been about to betray, was now in front of him, had become the most important thing in his life and was pulling him home.

That, my friends is repentance. The turning around, the reorienting, the leaving of – and indeed at times even being driven away by – that which was at first oh so enticing and compelling but which, truth be told, has been unhealthy from the get-go. Repentance: being turned around and drawn back to God's very best for you, to that which God has had in mind for you all along but which you've just been blind and deaf to up until now. And when you do that, saying, "Lord, I really messed up; forgive me and get me back on track," then, as Isaiah promised so many centuries ago, God will have mercy and will freely pardon.

That's what Jesus wanted for those folks who insisted upon changing the subject and whom he sought to get back on track. That's what the Cross is all about; that's what Jesus' death and resurrection are all about; and that, too, is the focus of this season of Lent.

So what does the life of one who is changed in this way look like? In this valley, where we are so quickly absorbed by activities and lifestyles, by our houses, our jobs, making a mark, getting aboard the right startup bandwagon ... what shape might be taken by the life of one who has gone through the great turnabout? A few of you may have been at the

MOPS meeting on Tuesday. Pastor Dan spoke and shared a Nicole Johnson video clip.¹ It's rather good, and you can find it on Youtube if you search for it by title – “The Invisible Woman.”

I'm not going to go through the whole thing here – but I would like to offer just one brief moment that gave a marvelous perspective. At one point, Johnson opens a book on the great cathedrals of Europe, noting how often we don't know the names of those who designed and built these overwhelming monuments to faith in God. These people are “invisible” as it were, known only by the great work they left behind.

She tells “a story about one of the builders who was carving a tiny bird inside a beam that would be covered over by a roof. And someone came up to him and said, ‘Why are you spending so much time on something no one will ever see?’ And ... the builder replied, ‘Because God sees.’” Because God sees. That, my friends, is the outcome of a life marked by the great turnabout – repentance, if you will – the kind of turnabout that God wants for your life, too. And there's a joy in it – a real and complete joy. A sense of, “Yes, this is where God would have me be – doing this and not that.” A life well spent ... “because God sees.” Repentance: the great turnabout; because God, who, in Christ, offers mercy and freely pardons, really does want the very best for your life. Amen.

¹<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YU0aNAHXP0>