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Turn Back and Live

Ezekiel 33:7-11

7So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. 8If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. 9But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

10Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" 11Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. Romans 13:8-14

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At the beginning of each summer, I set out to read a couple of books that for some reason I don't make the time or space to read throughout the rest of the year. I'm a frequent borrower from my local library, so a shout out to those who tap this amazing resource we have here in New Hampshire.

One book of non-fiction I raced to read before the famous director Marin Scorsese turns it into an upcoming movie, is [Killers of the Flower Moon](#) by David Grann. Set in Oklahoma of the 1920's, it tells the tragic tale of the Osage Native Americans, who were the richest people per capita in the world after oil was discovered beneath their land. You can probably imagine how that turned out.

Five years ago, the same author, David Grann wrote an article published in The New Yorker (The White Darkness February 12 & 19, 2023) about the life and death of Henry Worsley, an elite British officer and Renaissance man. He was inspired by one of the last great polar explorers Ernest Shackleton, who in 1907 attempted to trek on foot 1,000 miles across Antarctica – by far the most brutal environment in the world.

Shackleton and his large group never completed the expedition. When it became clear to him that he and his men were in mortal danger, he retreated and headed home. He quipped “a live donkey is better than a dead lion, isn’t it?”

In 2015 Worsley set out retrace and complete the journey. His expedition would be a solitary one, without a crew, no dogs, no caches of food deposited on route. Worsley carried with him a satellite phone and posted daily updates following his grueling slow progress. Schoolchildren around the world were captivated. Prince William sent him well wishes. Each day he willed himself forward to clock more miles before the winter months set in. His motto and mantra became: “always a little further.” Another was “success is not final; failure is not fatal.”

Worsley kept on pushing ahead until he was 100 miles away from the finish. Yet he was consumed by self-doubt and cold and frostbite were setting in. He had lost 40 pounds. The end of story came when Worsley was too weak to go another mile and called for what he dubbed the “most expensive taxi ride in the world” – an airlift to safety. Sadly, this contemporary polar explorer would later die in a hospital in Chile. In his attempt to do what his hero Shackleton had failed to do, he waited too long to call for help and turn back.

In the lessons we hear today from Scripture, there is a thread woven into our own spiritual journey. We may never choose to endure the ice and cold of the South Pole, but each one of us has begun someplace and somewhere and have arrived at this moment. Whatever label we want to call ourselves: seeker, learner, disciple, pious, follower, religious, faithful, or a hedging our bets faithful believer. And Scripture offers us images of the nature of God that can help us understand what God thinks of our wandering and living. The prophet Ezekiel shows us a God keenly interested in us knowing when it is time to change course and turn around.

In our annual trek through the liturgical year, we are still far away from Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent – 157 days for those who are counting. This prayer of absolution or forgiveness comes after the very long litany of penitence which makes it crystal clear for any worshipper that Christmas and Epiphany are in now in the rear-view mirror. The statement is this: Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desires not the death of sinners, but rather that they may turn from their wickedness and live. God pardons and absolves all those who truly repent, and with sincere hearts believe his holy Gospel.

Where does all this talk of wickedness and come from?

Ezekiel 33:7-11 -- So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel. Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Turn back: such a simple yet powerfully hard moment to name and locate exactly.

I have a habit of wanting to turn around when I'm searching for a destination or address, just before we arrive. I've become so good at wanting to turn back that it has become a sure sign that we are getting close.

To me, one of the most basis and essential questions we have imagining a God who cannot be seen but is still present, is to think and pray about what God most desires. Certainly, our faith tradition is all about relationship. God with creation. God with Christ. God with each of us. Each one of us with one another. I'm not always sure how this gets worked out, but I know it is the basis of all we know of a God who breathes life into us.

Our God wants for us fullness of life, and for that to happen, we need to be aware of where we are along the way to finding such fulfillment.

Ezekiel job was to guard, watch, warn and remind God's people that the relationship mattered. It was all and everything. He was to warn them about what choices move them further away from God, and which ones guide them back to love and justice.

We get annual dose of the reminder of wickedness on Ash Wednesday -- that they (we) may turn from their (our) wickedness and live.

I spoke last Sunday about how the apostle Paul wrote about love – how it should be genuine and unpretentious. And how we should run for dear life from what is evil. Quite simply what he is saying, like the prophets before him, is to turn towards the one and shield yourself from the other.

There is an urgency in his voice.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

It may not be easy to know when we are getting close or closer to where we need to be to live a joy-filled life – the abundant life that Christ envisioned for all of us. To know what it means to forgive as we have been forgiven. To love as God has loved us.

I think of that oft repeated statement: "If you feel far from God, guess who moved?"

It seems pretty clear that to care for and steward God's creation, climate experts are shouting saying that the intense weather we are experiencing is likely a sign that carbon immersions have be reduced or life for much of humanity will be impacted beyond what we can imagine. What a complex task to get so many different and competing agendas, nations and economies to cooperate. Lord help and guide us.

Even our gospel reading from Matthew is a roadmap for how to turn back from moments before it is too late. On the surface today's gospel is meant to help believers deal with moments of conflict in their communities.

On a deeper level, it lays the groundwork for forgiveness.

Dealing with conflict and the offering of forgiveness may be hardest tests of living out a life of faith. Conflict is always present in community, in families, in societies and in the church.

Before a relationship gets beyond repair, at our best we find the courage and wisdom to talk to another person before giving up and walking away. When and if there's an impasse, see if others can help. Only then will we know if forgiveness and change is possible. Matthew 18:15-20

The South Pole explorer Henry Worsley so wanted to finish what his hero Ernest Shackleton failed to do. "Always a little further" can be a motto for some to live by, and it can test limits beyond what is possible. Knowing our limits, when we have reached a moment of joy, might just to lead us to the place where God only knows.