

Sermon: Turn
Advent I, Year C
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Beginnings. Most of us like beginnings. They often offer us a sense of hope. Today marks the beginning of our new liturgical year. It is the first day of Advent, a season we pause to think about Jesus coming: Jesus' physical birth, his coming into our lives now and his coming again in the last days; and with it is an opportunity to start afresh in our relationship with God and with one another.

As I mentioned last Sunday, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is leading the charge in the wider church showing us how to live a Jesus centered life. He offers us a series of practices you can find inside your bulletin cover. While I introduced these practices back in August, we as a congregation will be more intentional in this new liturgical year in looking at these practices in depth. Today we begin with the first step, which is **Turn: to pause, listen and choose to follow Jesus**. Curry says, "With God's help, we can turn from the powers of sin, hatred, fear, injustice and oppression toward the way of truth, love, hope, justice and freedom. In turning we reorient our lives to Jesus Christ..."

So we must pause, which is difficult in this overcrowded season when there are so many things demanding our time and attention. We must pause to assess where we are right now in our life in God, pause to see what we cling to that crowds out God, pause to reflect. Where have we been, and where do we feel we should be going? Where is God drawing us now? Who is the person God is calling you and me to be? Like a flower turns to the sun can we turn to Jesus to re-orient our lives?

God desires our wholeness rather than our destruction. So what keeps us from turning? Why do we sometimes wallow in our inner prisons rather than turn to God's healing grace and the freedom it brings? Sometimes we carry burdens that we aren't even aware of, not realizing we actually CAN carry it to God. Too many times we carry burdens we have no business carrying. Do you ever notice that sometimes our biggest concerns are the last to find expression in our praying? What are the hidden things of darkness that Christ's light can heal?

When I was on sabbatical, I did an 8 day silent retreat at a Jesuit Retreat Center in CA. There was a labyrinth on the property which I walked several times. A labyrinth is not exclusively a Christian symbol or experience but it can certainly be seen and experienced as one. The labyrinth is different from a maze where one can make a wrong turn and get lost. It is one continuous path with lots of twists and turns that ends at a center. That center for most Christians represents the heart of God. One lovely characteristic of a labyrinth is that no matter where you are on the path, no matter what turn you are making, you are never far from center, never far from God. Most folks who walk a labyrinth tend to spend time in the center once they have arrived, relishing the thought of spending time in the heart of God. I noticed through the silent retreat there were several heavy concerns for me that had bubbled up while in prayer. So one day before walking the labyrinth, I gathered a few stones, each representing

those concerns. I was aware of the weight of the stones as I walked. When I arrived at the center I laid each stone down as I left each concern with God, and left them in the shape of a heart with a space open because I thought there would be more concerns down the road. I wanted to leave the door open for me to give later concerns over to God. I left these stones, these concerns, these worries, in prayer before God, felt I had left them truly in God's heart, and walked out of the labyrinth, deeply aware of the grace of my burden lifted. In turning to God my body felt lighter, my mind and heart were at peace, and I felt a great joy in wholeness.

You may have found it strange that the ushers gave you a stone or rock as you came into church today. Now you may understand what the purpose was. The stone you have may be just a stone or it can represent your own burdens or concerns, your worries, your fears, your anger, bitterness, disappointment, whatever it is that weighs you down and keeps you from fully trusting, fully enjoying the bountiful love and peace that Christ offers us.

So as you come up for communion today, I invite you to turn over your burdens, your concerns, anything that keeps you from enjoying God's abundant love. Bring your stone and place it symbolically at the altar of God on the table at the base of the chancel steps, then come up for communion to encounter the God who loves you more than you can know and allow God's light and love to transform your burden into gratitude and grace, peace and joy. And make sure you don't pick back up your stone on the way back to your seat! There will be two teams of healing people in the back and I strongly encourage you to let them pray for you. You may be specific in sharing your prayer request or just ask for a general prayer of healing. If you are not able to walk up here easily, you can give your stone to someone else to bring up for you. And after all the stones have been gathered, I am going to have our children, led by our acolytes, make a heart shape out of all our stones together here at the base of the chancel steps.

Last Sunday through the Revelation reading we were reminded that Jesus is the "Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end". The Greek word used there for "end", *telos* actually means not only "end", but can mean "purpose" or "goal". Today marks the beginning of Advent and in that beginning I invite you to consider the end, not just the end of your life on earth, but the purpose or goal that God has for you - to love and be loved.

Can this new day, this new season, this beginning, involve our turning to Christ, like a flower turns to the sun? Because it is Christ, our Redeemer, who calls for us to turn, it is God whose desire is to be in union with us, Christ who yearns not for our destruction but for our wholeness. May we find that turning to Christ this day and throughout the Advent season brings us the healing and joy God intends for us. Amen.