

Time to Turn

Isaiah 55: 1-9

Luke 13: 1-9

I have always been thrilled by trains. That may be due to my childhood home's proximity to the Long Island Railroad literally a block away with a train station at the end of the block. Unlike most of the Long Island Railroad, there were several lightly used lines that used diesel locomotives whereas the rest used electric trains. Electric trains made much better sense since they had to travel under the East River via tunnels to transit passengers to and from Manhattan. Those who were on diesel lines had to change at Jamaica; leaving the diesel and transferring onto an electric train for the last leg into Manhattan to Penn Station, and reversing the process on the return to the Island. Altogether, a real pain in the neck for daily commuters.

From my bedroom window at night, I could watch the rumbling train's headlight cut through the trees as it sped down the track, blowing its horn several times before coming into the station down the block, one of the early stops on its run into the city. It was like having built-in entertainment.

On the day I got my first car, I drove out to Oyster Bay at the end of the train line so I could look at the trains working in the train yard. Trains waited to leave. A train would come in. Freight cars would be lined up. The yard train would be chugging around. Derelict passenger and freight cars would sit on the fringe, presumably useful for parts or alternative uses. Way in the back of the yard was a turntable.

Getting a train turned around and re-locating it onto a different track could be hugely time-consuming. The turntable made it possible to drive a train onto the turning surface, easily turn the over-100 ton beast of a diesel locomotive to line up with its destination track, and send it on a new path in a matter of minutes.

Turning a big thing around takes some special maneuvering. For a diesel locomotive, a turntable is essential. For big jets, it's a stunningly small tractor, something that has the power to push and pull for a short distance, and the flexibility to make the sequence of turns in a small space. For a big vessel on water, tug boats make the difference, even though dwarfed by the huge ships that they are maneuvering.

For such big objects, it's necessary to employ a different operator to make difficult turns and maneuvers. That different operator may seem relatively small, simple, and unlikely to make such a difference, yet these kinds of changes require just such specialized equipment to manage what's needed.

In our scriptures today, we will hear how God offers a new way for the faithful. However, it requires those faithful to make a turn in order to get on that preferred path that God has presented.

Isaiah's prophetic words are addressed to the people remaining in exile in Babylon who have accommodated themselves quite nicely to the Babylonian way of life. Their liberation, courtesy of the Persians, is before them. Is it time to go home?

The compromises in their lives and practices may have brought them a sense of security, maybe satisfaction, and even comfort while in exile. Many were resigned to life under that empire and they may have managed to succeed in getting by, getting along with the Babylonian empire. It's likely that, in the process, they had eased up on their worship of their God and their devotion to the Torah-Law, or at least practiced it in a loose manner; not too obvious and not letting religion get in the way of things. They had adjusted their needs in life to form an **exile lifestyle**. There had been several generations in Babylon by now; only the elders would remember what Israel had been like. What was to be gained by abandoning their current lifestyle for one that seemed so uncertain back in Israel? Besides, what did God have to offer? Hadn't they made their *own* way in Babylon? Where was their God then? And hadn't God put them there?

True, they were always second class figures, aliens in a foreign land. And if there was trouble, fingers pointed at them. They lived under the thumb of masters and there wasn't much of a future. But at least they know what they have and they're okay with it.

Isaiah's word in chapter 55 comes as an invitation to the thirsty, the hungry, and the poor. Looking closely, it seems more of a metaphor rather than suggesting a real hunger, thirst, or deprivation among the people. The hunger and thirst and poverty are actually spiritual maladies, having desired things from the world, from the empire, that meant yielding on faith, religion, and spirituality. In fact, the abundance of God and faith in Israel's God was what would truly satisfy them. Such spiritual abundance is what only God can provide.

Isaiah says: *Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your **soul** will delight in the richest of fare.* This isn't about the stomach; it's about the soul. Isaiah reminds them that true satisfaction, a genuine sense of well-being, a firm sense of purpose and identity, and the unique caring of the Giver of life are not vested in the empire. Rather, they are *only* discovered in the God of their faith. The time is coming to return home – whether literally or not – to rediscover what it means to be a Jew, to be faithful to the one God, to be devoted to his heavenly kingdom instead of the Babylonian Empire, or any empire for that matter.

Isaiah seeks to turn back the curtain of illusion that says life in these times comes from serving the empire. The illusion that you're either part of the empire and what it offers or you're lost needs to be seen in its true and corrupt form, says Isaiah. God is the Giver and Sustainer of life, and God is calling you back to his side.

Isaiah recalls the promise to David, but not of empire *per se*. Rather he says that nations will come to you because 'God has endowed his people with splendor.' It isn't about riches, prestige, power, and empire, but the splendor of God that shines through his faithful people. Turn aside the delusions of empire and worldly greatness, for greatness is only with God. Indeed, it is God who defines the rise and fall of empires.

Will you gain your comfort, strength, and life purpose from worldly empire or will you turn yourself to the true gain of God's sacred promise, of God's Kingdom?

But these are people who saw the empire as master of their destiny. They were shaped by the mystique of power, wealth, and dominion that came with empire. They were hooked on the illusion of what the empire meant and had turned away from their God. Even if they were to return to God, how could they come back?

Isaiah has the answer for that, too. *Seek the Lord while he may be found ... Let him turn to the Lord and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will surely pardon.* This was the **prodigal son story** centuries before it was known as a Jesus saying. It means more to God to have you wholly with him than it does for any small issue of past wrongs and sins to prevent it. And don't try to figure it out; *for my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.* Time to turn and come back to the new life promise of God and Kingdom.

If the captive servants of Babylon were hooked on illusion, the story from Luke is about delusion, our personal way of creating a sham reality. Our gaze into the mirror selects our very best and enhances it. We neglect all the rest that might not appear so attractive.

Jesus gets told about a tragedy, some juicy gossip. The victims were Galileans, apparently killed by Roman soldiers, and somehow their blood got mixed up in the blood of their sacrifices. No one knows what that means or how it exactly happened, but it seems ghastly.

The logic at work in their minds is that God punishes sinfulness through everyday events, and God targets *only* sinners. Everyone knows those people are sinners condemned by God. If a tragedy befalls someone, then they *must* deserve it for their sinfulness.

Now the perception of God among these folks as waiting on sinners and then dropping a safe on their heads isn't too keen for starters. Then Jesus asks if they think that these Galilean victims were any worse sinners than all the rest of the people of Galilee. Then, citing another recent accident involving a toppled water tower that killed 18 there in Jerusalem, Jesus asks if these 18 fatalities were more guilty sinners than everyone else in Jerusalem. These are rhetorical questions, of course. All Galileans are sinners in the eyes of God, and all Jerusalemites are sinners in the eyes of God, and – it goes without saying – all of Jesus' audience was composed of sinners in the eyes of God. And yes, all of you in this room are sinners in the eyes of God.

The gossipers were delusional, as many of God's faithful can be, thinking in their own minds that they were somehow *more* righteous than others. Sinners worthy of judgment always seem to be someone else, not us. Those sinners upon whom tragedy falls, they were clearly condemned by God. As if we have the mind of God, we can even explain how God deals with all these sinners.

To make his point, Jesus spins a parable about a fig tree that failed to produce figs. That fig tree might be a pathetic, spindly thing. Walking through a grove of healthy trees, there is this anemic thing, alive but certainly not producing. 'A waste of space,' declared the owner. 'Get rid of it and let something beneficial to me grow in that place.' But the caretaker urges patience, asking yet another chance, refusing to give up on the barren tree.

You see, we're the barren trees, we who were planted and cared for, for whom there was great potential and great reward. But we're the disappointment, yielding nothing worthy of our continuation.

Jesus fills the role of the caretaker, beseeching a season of gracious forgiveness in the hope that the unworthy and condemned tree turns around and meets the need of the owner. In this way, Jesus is advocating for us, the trees whose faith hardly produces anything worthwhile. We're the tree that *could* be productive, that *should* be productive. Yet our faithfulness is stunted and we are unworthy.

Despite the undeniable claims against us, Jesus begs, interceding for our benefit, even though we don't deserve it. (And you know that every year when the owner comes around and insists that the barren fig tree be uprooted and cast into the fire, Jesus the caretaker of God's people will be there once again begging for another season, another chance.)

In Lent, we're called away from the illusions of the world's claims on our lives, its silly notions of success and its thin ideas of goodness, its pathetic regard for righteousness and its corruption of justice. What the world expects of us has nothing to do with God's desires for us.

And we're called to see through the delusions that imagine ourselves as righteous and worthy when we're neither. Typically, we pursue a worthless charade that fails to honor God, serve the Lord's promise, or measure up to the life we've been given. In the end, we've detoured, turning away from the servant work for our Lord as we turn instead to pursue the futile promises of the world.

Lent is a season for truth-telling and truth-seeking, the small operating engines to turn us around and point toward a new understanding of our world and ourselves. Moreover, it means turning our lives to follow the pattern for which God created us. It's important that we expose the illusions and turn from delusion so that we can turn instead in this special time to producing the fruit of goodness and righteousness, justice and peace as we serve Jesus Christ, our true Lord and Savior.

May we come before the Lord in repentance, seeking to model his way in deepening our faithful discipleship.