

March 21, 2010 Fifth Sunday in Lent
Isaiah 43:16–21, Philippians 3:4b–14
Northfield, VT United Church of Northfield

Turning Points – Present, Past, and Future

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Introduction - The Exile and Return – Show Map of Babylon

During the past several Sundays, we have looked at the lives of biblical characters and focused on the very point in their life where God was sending them in a different direction. We saw how God made Abraham a parent at old age and the father of his people. We recounted the story of Jacob, wrestling with the angel as he strove to reunite with his brother and bring harmony to his family. And on the First Sunday in Lent, we recalled Jesus' struggle in the wilderness to commit himself to the challenges of his ministry.

This Sunday, we will examine some turning points of entire groups of people – the Hebrew People, the people of the Christian Faith, and the world-wide community. I am going to take you on a whirlwind tour of history! We begin with the history of Israel at about 600 BC.

The Old Testament Kingdom of Judah lasted under the kings who followed the famous King David, for 420 years. Then in 587 BC, the Kingdom was conquered by the Babylonians. Babylon was the land east of Israel, and ruled at the time by the famous King Nebuchadnezzar. An earlier invasion into the area of Palestine had begun the deportation of the Jews into Babylon. So in 587 BC, a large number but not all of the Jews were deported to Babylon. Ezekiel was the prophet God charged with challenging the Jews in captivity, and you can find more about that story in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel.

The exile ended in 538 BC when Persia conquered Babylon. King Cyrus, of Persia, is well known for allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem. Indeed, King Cyrus is mentioned in this context in Isaiah chapter 45. Listen to this bit of Biblical history from chapter 45

Cyrus – Isaiah 45

Thus says the Lord,

the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker:

Will you question me^{*} about my children,

or command me concerning the work of my hands?

¹²I made the earth,

and created humankind upon it;

it was my hands that stretched out the heavens,

Turning Points – Past, Present, Future – Lent 5C

and I commanded all their host.
¹³I have aroused Cyrus* in righteousness,
and I will make all his paths straight;
he shall build my city
and set my exiles free,
not for price or reward,
says the Lord of hosts.

Ezra 8 Quote (verses 31-37)

The return of the Hebrew People to Jerusalem is chronicled in the Old Testament book of Ezra. Let me read to you know a part of the 8th chapter so you may get a feel for the power of the story:

31 Then we left the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem; the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes along the way. 32We came to Jerusalem and remained there for three days.

35 At that time those who had come from captivity, the returned exiles, offered burnt-offerings to the God of Israel, twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and as a sin-offering twelve male goats; all this was a burnt-offering to the Lord. 36They also delivered the king's commissions to the king's satraps and to the governors of the province Beyond the River; and they supported the people and the house of God.

Psychology of Return

So many of the people returned home after almost 60 years in captivity. Sixty years is a long time, and a lot can happen 60 years time. Indeed, over the span of a generation, many who were deported to Babylon would have died there, and many who returned would have been born in Babylon. In 60 years a lot would have changed. Few of the people who returned would be recognized by those who were living in Jerusalem. There would be a lot of adjusting to do. Scholars suggest that about 40,000 Jews returned from Babylon.

Exile and changes in life on return.—my return from England in 1974

I can well imagine what this return from exile might have been like. When I returned to America, after a year of studying at Cambridge University in England, to my final year in seminary at Andover Newton Theological School in 1974, a lot had changed. An entire new class had come into the school in my absence. My girlfriend had a year to try out some new relationships which later proved fatal for my relationship with her. And the price of a cup of coffee had gone up. Altogether, I felt like a stranger on campus. So, I had a lot of adjusting to do in my new old academic world!

A Turning Point in the history of the Hebrew People

The period of so called “captivity” had a very significant effect on the culture of the Jews and religious life in Israel. In that time, the role of the Torah changed and it was redacted and re-written. Also during that time period, the more current form of Hebrew writing was adopted, replacing an older style of writing.

So, very surprisingly, this transition period, which is often viewed as tragic and traumatic, had long-lasting positive effects on Jewish Biblical history and culture.

I would say, this return of the Jews to Israel marked a Great Turning Point in the life of the Hebrew People. Life did not return to the way it was 60 years before, but moved on in a new God-ordained path.

The Role of Isaiah Chapter 43

It is my sense that the arrival of 40,000 Jews, strangers and yet relatives, into a world different from that which they had come 60 years ago, created a lot of confusion and required a lot of adjustment. It is my sense also, that the people became confused and discouraged. For the prophet Isaiah, in our passage for this morning, tries to get the people back on track.

First, he reminds them of the heritage of the saving work of God, a reminder clearly of the exodus experience and the crossing of the Red Sea:

Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

Isaiah’s Call to the Future

Then God, speaking through Isaiah, calls his people to look to the future –

Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness

and rivers in the desert.

The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,

The world has changed. God has a new plan for the future of the Hebrew People, and God is challenging them to move into the future. When they feel discouraged, or even depressed by the changed world they live in, God promises a new thing. “A way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert.”

Turning points

I now want to begin to move our thinking together forward. I believe that throughout history, people get stuck. Then God somewhat magically works in and through history and gets things unstuck.

I will sketch some turning points very briefly. You will hear more in later sermons, I'm sure. This is only a short list to help you think about the meaning of a “turning point.”

What is a turning point? I think a turning point is a time when the direction of history takes a big turn, and the culture moves toward very significant changes. The turning point may begin with a critical event, but in reality, a turning point builds slowly. (Life changes much faster today, so a “turning point” may sneak up on us much more quickly!)

This morning, we are looking at global turning points. So from the global, we can find the proper context for life here on the local level.

Let's quickly look at a couple of turning points you know well.

The Arrival and Resurrection Jesus Christ⁴

The resurrection of Jesus the Christ was a major turning point in the history of the world. It certainly changed the focus and character of Western Civilization. The arrival of Jesus seems to come from out nowhere, but I think if you read the Advent story carefully, you can see it coming down the railroad track of history. I will leave this turning point for the Easter Sermon, and move to another familiar turning point just now.

Pentecost

Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the so called birthday of the church which we celebrate on May 23, makes a turning point in the life and future of Christianity. A fragmented group of followers of Jesus become more united at Pentecost. You'll hear more about this on Pentecost

Sunday.

Martin Luther and Protestant Reformation

The rise and impact of the Protestant Reformation, I believe, is another major turning point in history. Martin Luther seems to be the one who kicks off this spiritual revolution, but there are certainly more characters in this play than I will mention now. Certainly, if you examine history carefully, I think you could see this one coming. But perhaps hindsight makes this clearer? Certainly, elements of the Christian Faith were stuck and needed to be unstuck!

Isaac Newton and the rise of science

Isaac Newton and the rise of modern science might mark another turning point in history. This period might mark the beginning of what is called by historians as the “modern world.” This is the period beginning approximately in the 1600’s when we have the Age of Reason.

The industrialization of Western Civilization

Another turning point, at least in Western Civilization is the industrialization of Western Civilization. Here, the rise of science and innovation beginning in the 1700’s changes the entire fabric of western civilization. These changes, however, could be considered both blessing and curse.

The Rise of the Internet and the Web-connected World

Coming closer to the present, we might consider another turning point to be The Rise of the Internet and the Web-connected World. This certainly marks the character of our becoming a “world community” instead of just country communities.

The Turning Point of the Modern Era

I want to strongly suggest that we are today in the midst of another turning point. Some historians declare that we live in a post-modern society. What is the post-modern era? I’ll leave this question for a future sermon.

Signs of change in direction and attitude about the future.

What are some signs of a change in the culture world-wide. In spite of the impact of mergers and big business, and the influence of the multi-national economy, I believe there is a case for reclaiming the power of the individual and the local community.

Climate Change and the Peak Oil Crisis

Much of the evidence of a present day turning point revolves around climate change and the energy crisis. Evidence of this matter was in the news in the Copenhagen event last year.

You can find this perspective in a book I've borrowed from the Brown Library across the street - the book is called The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight: The Fate of the World and What We can Do about it Before It is too Late. (Author: Thom Hartmann)

Awakening the Dreamer Weekends

Last Summer I had an opportunity to experience another sign of the Great Turning of the modern era. I attended an Awakening the Dreamer Weekend.

This grass roots weekend inspires participants to respond to the global climate and energy crises in a very concrete way. This program was begun by some folks who worked with native peoples in the Amazon jungle. When they asked those people how they could help, they said, go back to your people and change the world. I especially like their mission statement because it includes spirituality. Let me read you their mission statement:

Our mission is bringing forth an environmentally sustainable, spiritually fulfilling and socially just human presence on Planet Earth

Transition Town Movement

Shortly before moving to Northfield, I became acquainted with the Transition Town movement. Begun in England about 5 years ago, this is a grass roots strategy to help local people in their own way in their own town address both the climate crisis and the energy crisis. The very name, Transition Town, speaks of a turning point. Putney, Vermont, is actively engaged in the process of becoming a Transition Town. (Do you think Northfield should become a Transition Town?)

Book – The Great Turning

Another sign that we are approaching a turning point in our history, comes from the book The Great Turning. This book is a major text for a course in social change at the School for International Training in Brattleboro,. David Korten, the author views our world as very much at a turning point at the present time. At the very beginning of the book, Korten states the choice the people of the Earth have to make. He states the choice by quoting the year 2000 Earth Charter. Let me read it to you since I believe it speaks for itself:

The Earth Charter

“We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.”

Korten on the Great Turning website speaks of the importance of faith communities in nurturing a change of course at this critical turning point in history:

“Many of the most effective and enthusiastic organizers of lectures, discussions, and actions related to [The Great Turning](#) and [Agenda for a New Economy](#) have been religious/spiritual groups, including Unitarian Universalist, Episcopalian, United Church of Christ, Unity, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Evangelical Lutheran, and United Church of Canada. Changes of the magnitude required to turn the human course from Empire to Earth Community necessarily depend on a spiritual awakening and we are encouraging churches of all denominations to serve as centers of community building and spiritual inquiry drawing on the full range of human experience and knowledge. “

A Vision of the Future Church

The Search Committee is meeting this coming week, so we at the United Church begin our journey toward the turning point of the call of a settled pastor. So, if we, as a church, review our past to discover turning points, and if we can see how they came to be in partnership with God, we can better plan for our future ministry.

The UCC, the denomination of the Still Speaking God, Gracie Allen said, “Don’t put a coma where you usually put a period.” The point here is that our United Church of Christ denomination is pointing to the future through its “God is Still Speaking” theme. God has more wisdom and guidance yet to give us as we move into the world of post-Modern culture.

Conclusion

There are in the long path of history a series of miraculous turning points. This morning we recalled the turning point at the Red Sea, where the Israelites crossed into freedom. There was the turning point for Abraham as he took his family to the land of Canaan. There was the turning point lifted up this morning at the point in history where 10,000 Israelites returned from Babylon and years of captivity. Today, we are approaching the great Christian turning point, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

This morning we examined in only the briefest way – with promises for a deeper view in the future – the cultural and economic conditions of our present time, laying claim to the possibility that we are at this very moment on the edge of a turning point in history.

Lent – a season of turning inward. Today we look inward to the earth’s history, but then we raised the challenge for outward societal change.

I also raised the possibility that as we enter the beginning of the interim time, here at the United Church, that we also are at a turning point in our history. If we are to begin in this interim time to shape the future of the United Church, it will serve us well if we can discern the turning points and the direction of the present culture.

As we have seen this morning, God is ever pushing us into new directions. He is finding new ways to make it possible for the Kingdom to come on Earth as it is in Heaven. For our earthly kingdom has a long way to go for it to resemble the Heavenly Kingdom.

Commendations

If God can do the impossible – to water the desert – he can help us be part of the next Great Turning, so that we may move forward and our grandchildren don’t look back and celebrate the Great Disaster.

I love history, and this sermon is just a short overview to whet your appetite for the challenge of figuring out the destiny of the United Church in the twenty-first century.

Remember the words of Paul we read this morning:

“Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus”. Amen!