

The Turning Point
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Scripture Readings: Acts 9:1-20, Mark 1:14-20

This week on the Evening News, Brian Williams was broadcasting from Cuba. He opened the program by marking an historic “turning point” in US-Cuban relations. The long embargo is lifted and we are bearing witness to history in the making. Sometimes, we are fortunate to be made aware of a turning point, but other times, we only recognize it in retrospect. Sometimes turning points are unexpected, like the attacks of Pearl Harbor and the World Trade towers; other times turning points are anticipated, as with the American Revolution. While the particulars may differ, every great story has a turning point. And the greatest stories have turning points that change all of human history.

This morning we will explore three great biblical stories that mark decisive turning points. The characters in our stories are Jonah, Simon, Andrew, James, John, and Saul. Each character was called to a particular purpose with a unique story. Jonah called to prophesy to the people of Ninevah; Simon, Andrew, James and John were called by Jesus to be among the very first disciples; Saul was also called by Jesus—though after his resurrection—to spread the Good News to the Gentiles. But what was the turning point? How did a group of ordinary people help transform all of human history?

Let’s begin with Jonah. The book of Jonah is a bit different than other prophetic books in the Bible. Rather than focus on the content of the prophecy, the focus is on the actions of the prophet himself. Jonah was called by God to prophesy to the people of Ninevah. God had taken notice of the wickedness of the Ninevites. But rather than do

God's will, Jonah's response was to flee. One thing I learned from the commentaries is that the name Jonah means "dove," which is appropriate since he "takes flight" from God's edict. Rather than go to Ninevah, Jonah rebels and books passage on a ship to Tar'shish.

But he would never reach this distant land. Instead, a violent storm came over the sea. In their terror, the passengers on the ship thought they could figure out who was at fault. Surely this storm, they thought, was punishment for someone's wrong doing.

They "cast lots" and all signs pointed to Jonah. So they asked him which God he worshipped, believing that Jonah was trying to flee from the presence of his God. But as Jonah points out, this would be impossible, he confessed that he was indeed trying to flee from the God of the Hebrews, the very God who made the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" they asked Jonah. His solution: "Throw me into the sea!"

At this point, I think Jonah is still desperately trying *not* to go to Nineveh. I don't know what he expected to happen. But my guess is that he believed it was all over for him; he'd accept his punishment by drowning and that would be the end of it. Most importantly, he would get out of doing what he was supposed to do, which is what he wanted all along. That's not what happens next, of course, because this story has a

turning point. “The Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.”¹

This gives Jonah some alone time; it gives him the opportunity to reconsider his life and renew his commitment to God. When he is delivered from the fish three days later, God again speaks to Jonah. The message is the same as before: “Go to Nineveh, I have something for you to tell them.” This time Jonah goes. His turning point transformed him from a rebellious dove taking flight into an obedient prophet—a fishy smelling obedient prophet. So Jonah goes to Nineveh and proclaims the message God gave to him. In the Hebrew, he says only a mere five words, which he repeats as he walks across the large city of Nineveh. “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

All the Ninevites believed Jonah. They repented of their wickedness. They all dressed in sackcloth, from young to old, from weak to powerful. They even covered their animals in sackcloth as well. They fasted, abstaining from both food and drink. And all of these activities signified that they were turning “from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.”² This repentance was surprising, even to God. According to the text, God actually “changes his mind about the calamity”³ he had promised to bring. God does not destroy them, but shows mercy and grace. This is an interesting and controversial claim; many theologians have insisted that it is an impossibility for God

¹ Jonah 1:17.

² Jonah 3:8.

³ Jonah 3:10.

to have a change of mind. What is controversial is that the word used here is what we often translate as “repentance,” so it’s basically saying that God repented. If God is perfect, why would God ever need to repent? The Hebrew word signifies a different concept from what we think the word repent means in English. Basically it means that God had a change of mind. God had planned to destroy the wicked city, but they repented, so a “change of mind” is appropriate. God responds to the repentance of the Ninevites with repentance. God changes course from plans of destruction to plans of mercy and grace. The story of the prophet Jonah, then, is really a story full of turning points. Jonah, all of the Ninevites, and even God repent. The turning point is a total shift in being, each is set forth in a new direction.

In the Gospel of Mark, we learn more about the biblical turning point, that is, repentance. Jesus begins his ministry by issuing a universal call to repentance. He proclaims the presence of God’s kingdom has come to earth. He then turns to four unassuming fishermen. From the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James and John. Mark does not tell us if Jesus and the fishermen were already acquainted. For all we know, they could have been perfect strangers. But there was something remarkable about Jesus that made these men, leave everything to follow Jesus. Their lives changed completely from that moment on.

We don’t know much about who these disciples were before they met Jesus. We know simply that these four were fishermen. But were they merely ordinary men? Or were they selected because they were exceptionally devout and pious? We might think that they were men of exemplary faith already; but Jesus doesn’t always call the most righteous. Just a few verses later in Mark’s Gospel, this point is made explicit, when

some Pharisees observe and criticize Jesus for taking company with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus' response was to say: "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."⁴ This is good news! Jesus is not calling only those among us who are righteous; he calls ordinary people. He calls people like you and me to follow him—not because we're perfect, but because we're sinners.

The Gospel of Mark emphasizes that Jesus' coming to earth is the very gospel itself, that is to say, Jesus *is* the "good news." Jesus proclaims: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; *repent*, and believe in the good news." That's a pretty big turning point: God's kingdom breaks forth into human history, bringing the fullness of time. Jesus' good news is a message for everyone. But he also specifically calls four disciples, to coopt them in the most major turning point of human history.

How do we respond to this turning point? We, like the disciples, are called to "repent." This word *metanoia* in the Greek, is tricky. Some think that the English translation "repent" doesn't do justice to the Greek concept. In English, this often signifies feeling sorry for sinfulness. The Greek concept is more about changing the person's entire nature, transforming one's whole mentality and conduct henceforth. It's not about feeling sorry for past sinful actions, but rather it is a total transformation of

⁴ Mark 2:17.

mind and action. It signifies a turning from sin toward a new way of being. We are invited to change our hearts and minds, to change from sinners into kingdom builders.

Saul also had a turning point, that is, he “repented.” He was transformed from a persecutor of Christians and turned into a kingdom builder, spreading the Good News all over the Mediterranean world. Before Saul’s turning point, he believed that he was fully following God’s will, unlike Jonah who knowingly disobeyed. Saul was given authority to persecute the Christians from the main synagogue in Jerusalem; he was operating under orders. This new movement of Jesus followers posed a threat to Hebrew religious practices, and Saul meant to snuff them out. But on the Damascus road, Saul encountered an intervention. A bright light appeared and blinded him; it was the resurrected Lord, who intervened to change Saul’s entire life. Saul becomes the Apostle Paul, called as “an instrument...to bring [Christ’s] name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.”⁵

Paul isn’t the only one of our figures whose turning point came with a name change. The fisherman Simon became Peter. So significant was the turning point, that they needed a brand new name! Turning points in this biblical sense are like that, they signify not just the concept of feeling contrition over our past conduct, but mark a transformation into a whole new way of being. Paul is a totally different kind of person than was Saul. He turned from one way of living into a totally new way of life. Saul lost his eyesight. But when he regained it, he also received a new vision for his life. He was

⁵ Acts 9:15.

filled with the Holy Spirit, baptized, and began to proclaim the Good News that Jesus is the Son of God.

One interesting feature of Saul's turning point is that the new way of being is not necessarily an easier path. When the Lord was instructing Ananias to find Saul, for instance, God says "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."⁶

Saul is chosen, but being chosen is linked to suffering and death for the sake of the Gospel. Jesus was also chosen and this meant suffering and death. But death is not final; it is not the end. It is simply a turning point. This is why Jesus' resurrection is the greatest story ever told: the turn is from death to life.

If you're like me, you might occasionally reflect on the turning points in your own life. What were your turning points? What changed the course and direction of your life completely? Perhaps you recall the beginning of a new relationship, a graduation, a new job or career change, retirement, the loss of a loved one, or the birth of a new family member. We all probably have some experience with such turning points. Recognizing a true turning point is to identify that an old way of being is transformed into a totally new way of living. We aren't usually greeted with a blinding light blocking our path, like was the case for Saul. But God's invitation for us to repentance, to a true and total transformation of our mentality and conduct is just as potent. Will you recognize this turning point?

⁶ Acts 9:16.