

We Return

A Sermon on Isaiah 43 and Luke 3 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ January 12, 2025

I begin by passing around a little diagram. Some of you have seen this before. It looks like a fishhook. It comes from one of my seminary professors: Dr. Garth Green. Dr. Green drew this little diagram on the whiteboard on the first day of class, and in many classes that semester. No matter whether we were studying Augustine or Bonaventure or St. Thomas Aquinas, Dr. Green would find an appropriate moment to draw this little diagram on the whiteboard.

His explanation of the diagram was related to the words we heard from the prophet Isaiah a few minutes ago. *Thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.* The big dot on the diagram is the place where you started your journey. God formed you as a person. God created you in the image of God. God gave you the ability to remember, the ability to create, the ability to reason, and the ability to love. Then your journey began.

God created you with the ability to make decisions about your life. You made some good decisions. But sometimes you made some decisions that were not so good. You might have made one or two decisions that were selfish. You might have chosen some words or some actions because you were afraid or angry. Some of these decisions led you away from God. This is what happens to all of us. We all end up wandering away from God, at least a little bit.

Then comes the critical part of the diagram. It's the place where there is a pronounced curve. At some point in our lives, we begin to return to God. For some of us, it's like what we read in Isaiah 43: *I have called you by name.* We realize that God is calling to us, calling us to return.

For some of us, our time of turning, or returning to God, is connected to the rest of that verse from Isaiah. God says, *I have called you by name, you are mine.* We realize that we belong to God. We realize that, even though lots of other people have expectations about us, even though people are sometimes judging us wrongly or harshly, we don't belong to those other people. We belong to God, and that's the thing that matters. We were created by God, and we belong to God.

For some of us, our time of turning, or returning to God, is connected to the next few verses from Isaiah. God says, *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.* Some of us have times in our lives when it feels like the waters of life are going to overwhelm us at any moment. Some of us have times when it feels like we are walking through fire. For some of us, that is the time when we turn back to God. As we are walking through the fires of life, we hear God calling to us. We say to ourselves, "If I'm going to walk through fire, I'm going to walk through fire with God beside me."

Professor Green explained the diagram to us this way. The important part is the part where we return to God. The part in the middle of the diagram, where we wander away from God is not so important, because it turns out, every single person wanders away from God. The important part is the part where we decide to return. The important part is the part where we turn just a little to the left or to the right and begin to turn back to God.

You have done this already today. You took just a few steps, or perhaps a few dozen, or a few hundred steps to get yourself to St. Paul's Church this morning. Or you were not able to join us in person, so you turned back toward God by turning on your laptop or other electronic device and joined us via the LiveStream. This is one of the ways we return to God; we return to the place where we hear readings from Holy Scripture. We return to the place that is dedicated to prayer, and to following Jesus.

No matter our differences, this is something that unites us. This is the important thing we have in common. Each one of us has made the decision to turn back to God, to return to God, by participating in this worship service.

Once we make our way to this worship service, we have many ways of returning to God. We might be returning to God as we sit in silence and remember who we are, and whose we are. We might be returning to God as we say the prayers or sing a hymn. We might be returning to God as we say the confession and hear the words of the absolution. This is what I noticed when I joined the Episcopal Church, thirty years ago. I noticed I was turning back toward God as I participated in the worship service.

Each year, as I have more experiences in the church, I notice that we have been given many rituals that are mostly about us returning to God. The ritual of communion includes many words and many actions, but communion is mostly about us returning to God. Most Sundays we offer prayers for healing and wholeness at the Peace Altar. This is mostly about us returning to God. Last weekend we held the burial service for June Bisson. This liturgy is mostly about us returning to God in our times of grief and loss. In two months, on Ash Wednesday, most of you will come to St. Paul's on a Wednesday and have ashes put on your foreheads. This liturgy is mostly about us returning to God.

There is one ritual of returning to God that is fundamental for disciples of Jesus; it has been made the foundation for our Christian churches. Baptism is the foundation for us as followers of Jesus. Baptism is a ritual of us returning to God.

Jesus was baptized, along with many other people, by John, the one known as John the Baptist. John the Baptist said many important things to the people as he was preaching all through the land of Judah. But mostly he was saying, "Return. Return to God." And so baptism became the fundamental ritual for us to return to God.

Many of us were baptized as babies. I was baptized at the age of 7 months by a pastor named Philip S Waters, the man I was named after. The very good thing about baptizing infants and children is that the parents of the child are making a promise to help the child learn the rituals and ideas of returning to God, presumably by helping the child return to God by returning, with that child, to church for worship over and over again.

It is good for children to be baptized. For me, as a priest, it is absolutely thrilling for us to celebrate the baptism of an adult. Adult baptism is the way it happened for Jesus and for the first generation of disciples. The really good thing that happens when an adult is baptized is that they are saying, through their words and through their actions, "I am returning to God."

In a few minutes I will ask Joseph six questions. Here's an example. I will ask, "Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?" These are all questions about turning back to God. They are important questions for the person who is being baptized. They are equally important for all the rest of us. We continually ask ourselves these questions because conversion and returning to God are life-long processes.

This is an important day for Joseph. It is not less important for you and for me. Today, as every day, we have decisions to make, and many of those decisions are about answering the main question for us as disciples. Am I turning away from God, or am I turning toward God?

At Christmas I delivered a sermon about the way God is asking each one of us to say 'yes'. God is asking us to take on some of God's work. This is part of our identity as a congregation. The people of St. Paul's are people who say 'yes' when God invites us to take on some of God's work. We are people who say 'yes' when God invites us to join in the work. This is part of what makes us the people of St. Paul's Church.

We are also the people who are attempting to return to God. The people of St. Paul's are people who understand that we need to return to God. We need to turn back to the one who created us in the image of God. We need to turn back to the one who gave us all of these gifts: the ability to remember, the ability to create, the ability to reason, and the ability to love. We need to turn back to the one who calls us by name.