

“Pivot Point”

The Rev. Dr. David Ensign

Isaiah 35:1-10; Mark 9

August 9, 2020

“If I hear the word ‘pivot’ one more time this year ...”

I heard someone mutter that in a meeting last week. My beloved was in a different meeting where someone else observed that “pivot” is the verb of 2020, and raised the question “what will be the verb for 2021?”

All of which got me to thinking that “pivot” might just be a perfectly fine translation, right now, of the first verb that Jesus speaks in Mark’s gospel: *repent!* The Greek word translated as “repent” is *metanoia*, and it carries the sense of a great turning of heart and mind and being. Perhaps, listening to Mark’s Jesus in the summer of 2020, we might hear an invitation to pivot, to turn from the path we are on to a path that is being revealed step by step as we seek to follow Jesus in the midst of all that is happening around us.

Arizona pastor Bailey Pickens wondered last month in *Christian Century* if perhaps we really are living through a moment of divine judgment. I am, for so many reasons, generally wary of such language. I’ve too often heard it used to condemn marginalized people, as when certain fundamentalist preachers blamed Hurricane Katrina on God’s wrath for the sins of queer folks and feminists and a laundry list of others, so I will always bring a healthy dose of skepticism to any claims about God’s judgment.

But, if we understand sin as separation from God and from God’s will for creation, and if we know the Spirit of the living God as power in the universe calling us toward shalom – toward wholeness, well-being, healing, community – if we’re being invited to breathe in that Spirit of peace, yet, in sin, we can’t breathe, then perhaps we are living under judgement. If we can’t, or won’t breathe in the Spirit of shalom, then perhaps divine judgment is upon us.

In that context, a great pivot is exactly what we need.

Repent! The kingdom of God is at hand.

Isaiah was announcing the same invitation. Pivot, people, and you will see clearly what God is revealing.

“They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.” When that great day of liberation comes, light will shine in the darkness and every eye shall see it. When that great day of justice comes it will roll on like the river Jordan after the rains fall. When that great day of salvation comes, all God’s children shall seek shalom and pursue it.

These are the promises of the prophets and apostles, of the righteous kings and of the messiah, of the holy texts of this and every age. When that great day comes, it will be well with my soul and all manner of things will be well.

And I want to know, what are we waiting for?

Are we confused, as the disciples so often seem to be in Mark’s gospel, not knowing or understanding whose presence they are in? Or are we confused about what power we have to act in response to Jesus’ invitation? Or are we confused about demons and illnesses and prayer?

Well, yes. Simply put, to all of that and so much more right now, we are confused.

When Isaiah wrote these words – the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing – he was writing to a community in exile.

They probably felt like they had been waiting forever for a sign that God still cared about them. They probably felt that their cries for justice and restoration would never be heard. They may well have ceased to believe that they were waiting for anything because they may well have lost all hope that anything better was going to come along. They may well have felt that they were living under divine judgment.

They have stopped asking “what are we waiting for?” and simply resigned themselves to living as strangers in a strange and foreign land.

The cupboards need to be cleaned out and a bunch of old papers purged. The garden needs some serious weeding, and the grass needs to be mowed. There’s an endless list of Zoom appointments and school schedule to figure out. We’re not hoping for the promised land – the day of liberation, of justice, of healing, wholeness, and peace – and we’re not waiting for something better, we’re just making the to-do list and checking things off and trying to stay afloat in the constant whitewater of this moment.

But into the middle of this – this world where the captives have become residents and maybe abandoned hope of anything different – into the midst of this Isaiah offers an alternative vision:

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert [...] A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; [...] it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

For Isaiah – as for all the great prophetic voices of Israel – the vision of shalom is indivisible from a vision of justice. These things – water in desert, songs instead of sighs – these things are signs that accompany the day of jubilee, that day when the oppressed go free, the blind have new sight, the poor hear good news. These signs of shalom mark the coming of another world, the inbreaking of what Jesus would call the kingdom of God come as close as the air we breathe. And we can breathe!

Isaiah cast this vision of a future otherwise, and Jesus wants to know, “what are you waiting for?” It’s here, in your midst, if you would but trust the vision, live into it without fear, and follow where I am leading.

I think I understand how the exiles felt. They were resident aliens in a culture that did not fully share their values, and they no doubt sometimes felt the foundation of their own values shifting beneath their feet as they went along to get along with the culture around them. They must have

felt powerless to change the systems that controlled their lives and they must have also sometimes felt that those systems were changing them and their children.

So Isaiah reminds them who they are. In the piece I just quoted I left out a line that sometimes troubles me. When Isaiah describes the highway in the desert, the Holy Way, he also says “the unclean shall not travel on it.”

You can imagine why that bothers me as purity codes are often used to exclude marginalized persons.

Indeed, in the passage from Mark, those same purity codes are context, for the “demonic possession” would likely have excluded this child and his family from the community. But Jesus, in casting out this demon and reminding his followers of the power of prayerful lives, also reminds the community of who they are and to whom they belong.

The practices of their lives – including, of course, the central practice of prayer – mark them as disciples. As Ched Myers reminds:

Is not prayer the intensely personal struggle within each disciple, and among us collectively, to resist the despair and distractions that cause us to practice unbelieve, to abandon or avoid the way of Jesus? [...] Yet just as the synagogue ruler’s daughter, who was presumed lost, is raised, signaling a “future” for Israel, so too this boy, giving us hope for the future [...]. To acknowledge that we are impaled on the contradiction of our belief and our unbelief is to take the first step toward healing.¹

In other words, the disciples in Mark are at a pivot point, and Jesus is inviting them, yet again, to turn from living under a divine judgment embodied in the constraints of the culture of the empire toward the freedom of God’s shalom.

We stand at a similar point, and judgment looks like the ongoing failures of our own culture spelled out in the headlines and felt intensely in our homes, schools, churches, hospitals, and countless other sites of disruption, protest, disappointment, loss, and grieving.

But through it all, I am reminded that the practices that marked the faithful as disciples were, first and foremost, reminders to the people of who they were and to whom they belonged. Jesus invites them, and us, to pivot toward healing. And, right there, we hear what we could yet make the verb of 2021: healing.

It’s not the only option – nor the only good option. In fact, at the risk of adding to Adam’s work sorting out the prayers of the people, I’d invite you to use the chat to nominate your “verb of the year” for 2021. We can still pivot in various directions.

Jesus, in saying “this demon takes prayer” is reminding them, and us, that we can yet pivot toward healing. Isaiah is reminding them, and us: it’s never too late to put into practice the things you say you believe, the things that mark you as God’s own, and to pivot toward healing. You can sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land – even when we cannot sing together in the same space. You can practice the golden rule even in a society in which the rules are twisted and the leaders dominate by monopolizing the gold. You can slow down to live prayerfully even in a

¹ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 245.

culture prizes busy-ness. There is never a wrong time to do the right thing, even when the culture around you does not value those things.

Feeding hungry people is always the right thing to do even when we have to create new, safe ways to do so. You don't have to go to the mountaintop to find beauty; these days when getting out of our own homes is a rarity, we can see and celebrate beauty and feel God's presence right where we are, and give thanks for it. You can sing a new song unto the Lord this and every day.

What are you waiting for? What are we waiting for?

We may well be tempted to wait until this pandemic passes before we make any great pivot. But, friends, heaven shall not wait. Now is the time. Let us, therefore, practice repentance, for the kingdom of God is at hand. Amen.