

**“THE TURNING POINT”**  
**Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8**  
**A Sermon by John Thomason**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**December 6, 2020**

You may have seen the editorial cartoon in the newspaper this past week. A lonely-looking man is looking out the window of his home as heavy snow falls outside. In the background, a musical device is playing the holiday song, *I'll Be Home for Christmas*. The man comments, “You can count on that.”

Yes, this Christmas you and I may feel confined and downright depressed to be stuck at home with limited possibilities for in-person shopping and partying, not to mention traveling and reuniting with our loved ones. To add insult to injury, many of us won't be here in church on Christmas Eve; we'll be – where else? – home.

But you and I can take heart. At Christmastime, home is precisely where we want to be, at least in a spiritual sense. Christmas is not just about going “over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house we go.” It's also about coming home – coming home to our best selves and coming home to God. When you stop and think about it, this is what the season of Advent is intended to do: to provide a map for our journey home.

The Old Testament lesson on this second Sunday of Advent is set during the time when the people of Israel are exiled in Babylon. Their fervent wish is to go home – home not only to their familiar surroundings, but also home to their identity as God's people and to a restored relationship with God, a God who has seemed very far away.

In his insightful book, *Come Back*, Roger Ross writes of the universal human experience of failure, loss, and disappointment. A long marriage ends, a cherished job vanishes, a robust body declines, a close relative dies. Perhaps poor choices are made which lead to terrible consequences, and it's a reputation that gets lost. Setbacks can assume many forms; but all of us eventually have a great fall and wind up in a place of exile, in a far country of grief, guilt, and even shame.

Roger Ross says that the only constructive way to respond to a setback is to make a comeback. You and I love comeback stories. Abraham Lincoln loses one election after another, but then wins the most important election of all and becomes perhaps our greatest president. LeBron James brings his hometown Cleveland Cavaliers back from a 3-games-to-1 deficit to overtake the Golden State Warriors and win the NBA title in 2016, giving the city of Cleveland its first major sports championship in 52 years. Or, there is the ordinary, obscure individual who rises like a phoenix from the ashes of personal defeat and becomes a surprising, inspiring victor. Over the past seven and a half years, I've seen some of you respond to a setback by gritting it out and making a remarkable comeback.

However, when Roger Ross speaks of a comeback, he's referring to something more than feel-good stories about people who manage to triumph over tragedy. You and I are not just “comeback kids”; we are also children of God, and when children of God make a comeback, we are not merely coming back to our former state of prosperity, happiness, or glory; more

importantly, we're coming back to God and to the self that God intends us to be, to our true and best self.

This is the kind of comeback that the prophet Isaiah announces is now possible for the people of Israel in exile. The sin that causes them to be sent into exile in the first place has been forgiven by God. Like people who have served their sentence in prison, they have paid the penalty for their disobedience and are now set free – free to return to their homeland, free to rebuild their lives, free to enjoy unbroken fellowship with God.

Isaiah warns that the way home won't be easy for the Israelites. The prophet describes the path back to their Promised Land as a "wilderness" (Isaiah 40:3). Here, the term "wilderness" has nothing to do with hiking in the Adirondacks snacking on granola bars, or being back-to-nature freaks who live in a cabin in the woods. For Israel, the wilderness is a place of wild beasts, temptation, sin, and bewildered wandering with no star for a guide. After their Exodus from Egypt, it takes Israel forty years of wandering in the wilderness finally to find their way home.

Isaiah addresses the apprehension of his people by offering a word of "comfort" (40:1), which is famously echoed in the opening solo from Handel's *Messiah*. Then Isaiah moves quickly to identify the source of this comfort; and so, of course, does Handel. "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain" (v. 4). In other words, the prophet announces a divine highway construction project through the wilderness, from Babylonian exile back home.

Note that the road is straight. Ordinarily, the way back from Babylonia to Israel follows the Fertile Crescent, going out of the way to avoid the perils of the desert wasteland. But this road is "straight in the desert" (v. 3). I'm reminded of a line from Robert Frost's poem *Servant of Servants*: "the best way out is always through." If you and I want to get out of the wilderness of defeat and despair, we do it not by going around the desert, but by going straight through the desert; not by avoiding our demons but facing them head-on.

Notice also that this is God's highway. It is God who will be traveling this road, leading Israel on their perilous journey. It is God who brings homeless people back home. The exiles bear no resemblance to adventurers like Ferdinand Magellan, who organizes a party which circles the globe and finds its way back to Spain. The Israelites have stopped searching for God; they don't begin this quest because of their own faith and courage; the fact is, they aren't doing anything to try to get home. No, this text tells of what God will do, where God is going. God is dragging Israel along with him, down the straight road back to their native land. The way through the wilderness is a way initiated by God and led by God.

So for you as well as for the exiles, the question is not, "What would it take for you to grope your way back home?" The question is, "What road is God building toward you today, during this Advent season?" Isaiah's words are not spoken to you, but you hear them as if spoken only to you – that voice or face from the past; that vaguely felt, but gnawing, sense of yearning; that echo evoked from deep within the soul's memory upon hearing again a Christmas carol not heard since childhood; that coincidence that might not have been merely coincidental. God is building a highway toward you; the question is, will you recognize it and take it?

In order for the people of God to return home, they first have to turn toward home. While I was living in Champaign, Illinois, as a young man, I had to drive to Chicago for a doctor's

appointment one winter day. I encountered a heavy snowstorm that became a whiteout as I headed north on Interstate 57. I was confronted with a decision: would I continue going in the same direction, hell-bent on keeping my appointment but facing certain danger, or would I turn around and head back to the safety of home? I sometimes make foolish choices, but in that instance, I made the wise choice. I've never forgotten that incident, because it was a metaphor for the many choices I've had to make in life – to keep going in the same dangerous direction or to reverse direction and return to safety and sanity.

The Christian author C. S. Lewis once observed: “Progress means getting nearer to the place you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turn, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road.”

The biblical word for this about-turn is “repentance.” In today’s Gospel lesson, Mark tells us that “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). Now, “repentance” is not a word you and I use frequently or comfortably. It’s an old-fashioned word we associate with beating ourselves up or groveling before God. But the Greek word we translate “repent” – *metanoia* – literally means to “turn around,” to do a 180 on a snowbound Interstate highway; or more to the point, to reverse course in the journey of life, to come home to God.

The late Fred Craddock told about a little girl from one of his early pastorates in Tennessee. Her parents sent her to church every Sunday but never came with her. They would pull in the church’s circular drive, the little girl would hop out of the car, and they go out for Sunday breakfast.

The father was an executive for a chemical company, upwardly mobile, ambitious. The whole town knew of this couple’s Saturday night parties, parties given not just for entertainment, but rather to advance their whole ladder-climbing scheme. Whoever was important to their plans determined who was invited. And the whole town knew of the wild, vulgar things that went on at those parties.

But every Sunday, there was the little girl in church. One Sunday Fred Craddock looked out over his congregation and thought, “There she is with a couple of adult friends.” Soon, he realized she was there with Mom and Dad. When, at the end of the service, an invitation to Christian discipleship was given, Mom and Dad came down front to join the church.

“What prompted this?” the young pastor asked this couple after the service. “Do you know about our parties?” they asked. “Yeah, I’ve heard of your parties,” said the pastor. “Well, we had another one last night. It got a bit loud, a little rough, there was much drinking. And it woke up our daughter, and she came down the stairs and was on about the third step. She saw the eating and drinking and said, ‘O, can I say the blessing? God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. Goodnight, everybody.’ She went back upstairs. The guests immediately began to say, ‘It’s getting late, we really must be going,’ and ‘Thanks for a great evening,’ and ‘Thanks for a good ol’ time.’ Within two minutes, the room was empty.”

Mom and Dad picked up crumpled napkins, spilled peanuts, and half-sandwiches, and took empty glasses on trays into the kitchen. And they looked at each other, and he said what they were both thinking: “Where do we think we’re going?” God had built a highway toward them, and they chose to change directions and walk on that highway.

While I was pastoring in Jackson, Mississippi, I became well-acquainted with two therapists who worked together in a counseling practice which specialized in treating people with addictions. They called their counseling center “The Turning Point.” I was curious as to how the center got its name. They referred me to the “Big Book” of Alcoholics Anonymous, to the chapter called “How It Works,” and to one of the most memorable passages in that chapter. These are the exact words: “Remember that we deal with alcohol – cunning, baffling, powerful. Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power – that One is God. May you find [God] now! Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked [God’s] protection and care with complete abandon.” And this is how that counseling center got its name – The Turning Point.

In the famous passage from the Big Book, you could substitute any hang-up or hindrance for the word “alcohol.” It could be something dramatic like another form of addiction, or it could be something seemingly innocuous like a selfish lifestyle or lukewarm discipleship or stale spirituality. The point is, we are all prone to head in the wrong direction and wind up in exile from our true home. God invites us to come back and provides us with a way back. But you and I can’t go home again unless we turn around and take the highway toward home.

“To everything (turn, turn, turn), there is a season (turn, turn, turn), and a time to every purpose, under heaven.” During the Advent season, we stand at the turning point.