

“Turning Around”

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*1st Presbyterian Church
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Luke 24:13-35*

Wyoming Valley West – Thank you, thank you, for inspiring us with your voices this morning! This school has a wealth of talent, not only vocal but their acting ability is top notch! Not too mention of course the high level of intellect!

I was among the thousands who were moved and entertained by the students at Wyoming Valley West a few weeks ago – with their production of the ever popular musical, “Les Miserables.” They were terrific! Every aspect of the production was first class!

You all probably know the musical is taken from Victor Hugo’s classic by the same name. It is set in early 19th century France and expresses the human struggle for redemption and revolution. Jean Valjean, imprisoned for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his family, after 19 years, is released. Hardened, disillusioned, out on the streets he steals again, from a Bishop. Caught, brought to the Bishop – the Bishop protects this criminal, keeps him from returning to prison with the proviso that Jean Valjean must become an honest man! Valjean is moved! Unbelievably mercy has been given to him!

He pledges to himself and to God he will change, he will turn his life around! Jean Valjean will turn his life into something meaningful and helpful. And for all the nasty, horrible vicissitudes of life he remains true to the turning around of his life.

The revolutionaries, the downtrodden want more out of life. They want the world to turn around, to change. Freedom, dignity, hope for all is their cry!

Liberty!

The great finale of “Do you hear the People Sing!” is stirring. It brings a visceral reaction – the human ascent to this turning around!

And what about dogmatic, one direction, straight laced inspector Ricky, I mean Javert? Even for him this one who can only follow the Law, without mercy, without human understanding, even Javert finally acts merciful. But, sadly he could not live in such a turning world. And such a great leap into the river that was on Wyoming Valley West’s stage!

Judeo-Christian themes permeated “Les Miserables” redemption, love, hope, and the human capacity to change direction, to turn around.

How many times in our lives have we needed to turn around, stop going in that wasteful, destructive, pointless direction, and travel in the direction of hope, creativity, purposefulness?

Never close yourself off from turning around in your life! Too often the habit, the same old, same old of your daily repetition drains your life of the possibilities and potentials that await you. Too often we settle in and settle. But, we have been created for so much more!!

About 2,000 years ago, there were two fellows who needed to turn around. They thought they knew something day's earlier. They dared to hope against hope. (Kind of like the French barricades and the early slaughter of innocents, empty chairs and empty tables.) These two, now on the road to Emmaus, leaving Jerusalem where Jesus is now dead, they felt empty, foolish.

Just days ago they believed in turn arounds! But, not now! "It's time to pack up, give up, and get back to the way things are! Same old same old!"

There had been some light, some fire of hope. But...they probably should have known better. They knew their history, and it wasn't all that pretty. Almost from the beginning of their history as a people, they experienced oppression and suffering. But they had met this "Rabbi" – somehow different from the others. He seemed to possess something within him that gave authority and hope to those around him. He warmed their hearts, and stirred their souls!

Dare they hope that he's the one? They couldn't help themselves! His life and teachings were all causing a flame of hope to rekindle within these people. "He's the right direction for our lives" - they hoped!

Look – he's in Jerusalem. Look at the welcome he received, with shouts and palms! He makes his mark, but some don't like it. Within a week – a week! He's dead – a ghastly death.

"Oh how we had hoped!" "The fire is out. The tomb is cold. Let's go home." "Let's turn and go back to the way things are" History repeats itself. Hope dashed to pieces. Why bother?

So there they are, the two of them, leaving Jerusalem (the place of hope, of possibility), and traveling back to the same old routine. Going in the wrong direction!

They are recounting the recent events, probably trying to figure out where they went wrong, where they got pulled into believing things could be different. As they are absorbed in conversation, the risen Christ appears to them, but they don't recognize him.

You see, they can't recognize him, because the fire of hope has gone out within them. So they just go back to life the way it was – and discuss the Jerusalem of the past.

How they needed to turn around!

Jesus asks, walking along with them, "What are you talking about?" Hearing this they stop dead in their tracks. Now they are incredulous, along with being depressed. They are wondering what type of hayseed do they have walking with them. Cleopas responds, "Are you the only person in Jerusalem that hasn't heard?" Now of course Jesus knew, but he wants them to interpret it for him, but it's really for themselves. They have missed the point – and it's staring them in the face. You see they had interpreted these events incorrectly, and Jesus wanted them to "look again." "Look again at the past events, perhaps you've missed something. Look at history, take care to read it well."

Listen again to their question to Jesus, which is really Jesus' question to them. They thought they knew it all. They knew the history. "Are you the only one around here who doesn't know your history?" Jesus says, "What history, what events?" Interpretation – the key! And here they go. They've gone over and over it. They were discussing it when Jesus arrived. Repetition is great, if you have it right, otherwise it's always wrong. You can write $2+2=5$...10,000 times, but it will never be correct. If you are going in the wrong direction, you will never arrive!! What you need to do is turn around! That makes all the difference!

So Jesus the teacher says – "Once again." They tell the history – at one point they say, "But we had hoped." (The fire is out. We're going back to the same old.)

Presupposed in the Judeo-Christian tradition is that history possesses meaning. It can offer truth, and contribute to the present and future. Today we walk down the road sharing histories. Today we are deluged by the multiplicity of interpretations of history and life. Often, we are like the two on the Emmaus Road – sad and hopeless. There is no compass, there is no fire within. If we ever hoped that life could change we gave that up long ago. The fire is out.

Several years ago social critic Christopher Lasch told a group at the Jewish Theological Seminary that disillusionment has become the very badge on modernity. So here we are, walking away from hope, from a vision, discussing what happened, but missing the point. What we thought should happen – didn't. Our plans, our misinterpretation that things should be easier hasn't panned out. And so we walk away in the wrong direction, and talk away 'hope', as it stares us in the face. In our day and age nihilism is the easy choice. The fire is out.

But, could it be that the fire within us (you) is never completely out? It's smoldering deep within you, as you traverse the road of history going in the wrong direction? As Christians, does not Christ walk with us, having us go over our own stories – to find meaning, to give hope? Our faith doesn't resolve the ambiguities of our lives, but it gives us a direction!!

Remember what happened when the two on the Emmaus road recognized Jesus? They said, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road...?" In the human breast there is a fire burning; a longing for hope, a desire for purpose, a drive to realize a vision, to travel in the right direction! To turn around!

And I love this!

And that same hour they went back to Jerusalem! They turned around! They got it! This time – they figured out that all of this history, all of these stories are better interpreted in hope, rather than in the same old, in death to all.

The two disciples, like ourselves, will still wrestle with the vicissitudes of passing history – but their direction is toward what we as Christians call the Resurrection, purpose, Hope! I love that phrase – of recognition and human aspiration – "did not our hearts burn within us...?" That turning around 2,000 years ago has changed the world! That turning around still happens today! Be open to turning around, to the wondrous possibilities that await your future!

Amen