

Sermon, Teshuva

The Very Rev. David J. Mashall, All Angels 5.4.25

I'd like to introduce you to my new favorite Hebrew word: Teshuva. It means "return", but it means a lot more than that. I am beginning to understand that teshuva is perhaps what the Gospel writers were pointing to when they wrote metanoia (beyond-thinking). Teshuva is to return to right relationship with God and the path of God: the mouth that had spoken falsehood now speaks wisdom, the trouble-maker now becomes a peacemaker.

Teshuva.

Changing and returning to the right path with God.

Here is a story of teshuva: In the Book of Genesis, the last story is of Joseph who was sold into slavery by his older brothers. Despite that turn of events, Joseph became the second in command of Egypt. There was a famine in the whole Mediterranean region which Joseph was prepared for. One day his brothers showed up for food. Joseph snuck a silver goblet into Benjamin's bag (he was his youngest brother and had nothing to do with his being sold into slavery). When the guards stopped the brothers and searched Benjamin's bag they found the goblet. Joseph tested his brothers. He said they can leave Benjamin there as a slave and return home free men. They refused to do so. It was a teshuva moment – they had changed and returned to the right path (knowing that selling Joseph into slavery was wrong) at great personal cost. That is when Joseph broke down and told them that he was their brother and he forgave them. The troublemakers had become peacemakers.

In Luke's Gospel there were two criminals that were crucified along with Jesus – one on his left another on his right. One criminal derided Jesus. The other said, "Remember me when you come into your Kingdom." Two criminals that both had the opportunity to teshuva; one did, and the other did not.

In our lessons for today, Saul – who became St. Paul the Apostle – had a teshuva moment when the risen Christ knocked him from his horse and he had a vision of Jesus sitting next to God in the throne room. Saul "returned" to God, to the path of God and to the cosmic power and energy that created him for who he is.

Peter, who denied Jesus three times, had a sit down with the risen Christ. Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him ("... more than these" – probably referring to the large haul of fish). Each time Peter said he did. It was a teshuva moment. He was returning to God, to the path, and to the cosmic energy that created Peter to be who he is.

It is hard to imagine Christianity without Peter and Paul. Because of teshuva, they are who they are. And, because of them, Christianity holds at its core the forgiveness and grace of God which passes all understanding.

As for you, this also means that return is possible with God.

An ancient rabbi was asked when one should teshuva. The rabbi replied: at least one day before you die. Of course, no one knows when that day is; all we know is that we have today.

Let me put it this way which is something I had to learn (and am still learning) myself. God created me with a particular cosmic energy for God's purposes on earth. For a while I ran from that image, that calling, that particular power and energy. But, God called me back and I returned. ... and am returning and will return. (It's a process, after all)

Since God changed the heart of Joseph's brothers and they showed teshuva; since God did not give up on Saul, or Peter, God is not giving up on you yet either. Return is always possible. Just make sure to do it at least one day before death.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.