

Midweek Lent 4 2017 Turning in the Dark
Conversion of Paul.

Several years ago, I was invited to a formal meal at the home of Bishop David **Ricken**. He is the Roman Catholic **Bishop** of the Green Bay Diocese. This was a kind of big deal. It was a gathering of representatives from several denominations here in the Valley. There was only one other Lutheran invited. The invitation had an address for his home but no map. I wasn't too worried. His address was on Riverside Dr. in Green Bay and I knew where that was and I had my trusty maps app on my phone. I had the app on all of the way up and I drove down Riverside, looking for the bishop's residence. I paid attention to the house numbers and just when I was sure that it was the home, my app said, "***Recalculating, take a legal u-turn***". So I did. Now I was going in the opposite direction and watched the number and again my app said, "***Recalculating, take a legal u-turn.***" Around and around I went, looking for the Bishop's home.

Finally I returned to a gas station at the south end of Riverside. They were able to tell me that the home was set way back on the property and couldn't be seen from the street. I had thought the front lawn was a park. However through the trees, I could see the light. I headed for that and found Bishop Ricken's home ...and dinner 😊.

You have probably heard me say before that a good way to translate the word for repentance is "return" or maybe even "U-turn"

The call to "Repentance" or to "Return to the Lord" is at the heart of the story of God and God's people.

"Repent" or "Return to the Lord" is mentioned at least 72 times in the Bible.

All through the OT, Israel, God's chosen people, would remain faithful for a while...until they weren't.

They would eventually be distracted or tempted by other gods or by their desire for independence and then they would get lost, sometimes literally like in the wilderness or in Babylon and other times spiritually lost to sin.

And then when things were bad enough, they would cry out and repent "do a U-turn" and return to God with new resolve for a while, until they forget God's faithfulness to them and once again get distracted.

From the distance of 4,000 years it reads a little like my trip to Bishop Ricken's home. Circling, but never arriving.

This happened with the Kings of Israel too. And it is reflected in the Psalms and of course, one great story of repentance is the story of the Prodigal Son who leaves his Father and squanders his father's gifts until the story says, "***He came to himself***" and knew that he should turn back and return to this father.

When we hear the story, we know we are the "Son" and God is the "Father."

My favorite image of repentance, of a U-turn that leads to a real transformation and new life is the story of Paul.

I thought this morning/evening I would give you the short version of Paul's U-turn.

If you want to know more you can read the book of Acts and then some of his NT letters.

Paul's story begins after Jesus' death and resurrection.

It is the early years of Christianity.

Paul was a Jew, a good Jew, a Pharisee.

The Pharisees were one of the main Jewish groups and they had a lot of rules.

They believed that following their rules made you righteous before God.

Pharisees hated it when people broke the rules and

Christians, who at the time were mostly Jewish, were by definition, breaking the rules of the Pharisees.

So Paul hated Christians.

He believed that it was a terrible sin to say that Jesus was God's Son.

If you believed that, then you deserved to die.

And so many Jews, especially Pharisees, hunted Christians and punished them.

Stephen was the first Christian martyr.

He was stoned to death.

Paul was there, holding the coats of his killers.

Paul then traveled from Jerusalem to Damascus, where he planned to arrest any Christian he could find there.

As Paul got close to the city, he saw a great light that was so bright it threw him to the ground and he was suddenly blind.

He heard a voice, saying "***Why are you persecuting me?***"...

"I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting."

This was the beginning of his conversion or U-turn.

Paul, still blind went on to Damascus where he was sent to a Christian who healed his eyes and taught him.

Paul was then baptized and eventually became the world's first missionary. About 1/3 of the NT is his writing and he began many Christian churches in Greece, Turkey and Europe.

That is what a U-turn might look like:

One big dramatic change.

Like the reformed slave trader who wrote *Amazing Grace: I was blind but now I see*.

Of course it is not always like that.

For many of us, it is a daily returning to the Lord.

Lent is the season that we spend serious time remembering our need for a God who welcomes us home.

The trick is to know where home is.

Just making a U-turn is not enough.

We may discover that something in our life is not working. We feel really sorry and maybe we even confess to God that we have screwed up.

However, it is not enough to turn around; we need to know where we are going.

Paul could have felt bad about killing Jews and stopped.

The Prodigal son could have felt bad and sent his father an apology.

Felling bad is only part of the story.

We're still lost until we find our way home.

Lent is a journey to our home in Jesus Christ.

Life can be a journey to our heavenly home.

So where do we go when we are lost?

Our Lenten-Easter theme this year is **Stumbling in the dark—Dancing in the light.**

Paul was literally struck by the Light of Christ.

If we are lost in the darkness of despair or sin, we can look for the light. The great thing about light, though, is that it sort of finds us, especially when we are lost.

That's the point of porch lights, search lights and light houses.

Sometimes in worship we sing a Gospel acclamation based on John 6:68.

Alleluia, Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Alleluia, Alleluia.

We may think we are lost but God has provided the light of Christ to lighten our way home.

This is the good news of our Lenten Journey.

Amen