

## "PIVOT!"

Isaiah 9:2-7    Matthew 4:12-25

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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The word "pivot" was not a regular part of my vocabulary until March 2020. Before then I hardly ever used the word. But once Covid hit, I heard and said "pivot" on an almost daily basis, along with "flatten the curve," "herd immunity," and "social distancing."

In an article written at the end of August 2021, Dave McGinn reported that since the World Health Organization declared a pandemic in March 2020, the word "pivot" appeared in more than 1200 newspaper articles, roughly 2.5 times every day within a specified period of time. In the same time frame prior to Covid the word appeared in 760 articles. "Pivot" has been used to describe everything from financial markets adjusting to the pandemic -- to people adopting new careers-- to restaurants finding new ways to pay the bills-- to schools trying to educate their children. And of course, it has been used by the church too.

We didn't have a lot of time to prepare. One day we were living like we usually did and the next day everything was different. We had to adapt very quickly to a new way of living that we didn't quite understand.

A "pivot" is the point on which something rests and turns or upon which something rotates or oscillates. As a Covid buzzword, it means to quickly and completely change the way in which you do something. For us in the church it meant that we had to figure out how we could still **"be the church"** when we couldn't **"go to church."** The irony was that because we cared about each other so much, we stayed apart.

In January of 2020 we had already set up a Zoom account and had started using the digital technology for meetings. It was very convenient and made it possible for people to meet without traveling. Then suddenly, we had to figure out how to be a family of faith as we worshiped on zoom. Many people put in a lot of time to make it work. And we are still learning.

I was pleased that we could pivot so quickly, that we could adapt and find new ways to continue to be a family of faith. Along with worship, we started two zoom fellowship groups- Wednesday morning and Wednesday evening- and they continue to meet, bringing together folks from across the country. I started a Thursday zoom story time for our children that ran until the end of the school year. It was delightful!

Committees and the Leadership Team met regularly on zoom for meetings. Our key words during this time were: pivot, adapt, flexibility. Your patience and support as a congregation during this time was incredibly important.

Then last year, when we thought we had some things figured out, I fell, and we all had to pivot again. We had to turn quickly and learn how to function in that new reality. My reality was severe and constant pain, not always helpful medical opinions, and the convoluted world of insurance bureaucracy. Your reality was continuing to function as a congregation without your pastor. It wasn't easy for any of us. But we survived and now we look ahead to a new year and maybe a new vision. It appears that this world-altering chaos that we call Covid is going to be with us for a long time. So, we continue to pivot, adapt, and find new ways for our ministry to thrive.

Pivoting often demands transformation and that is what we find in our scripture texts this morning. Sometimes pivoting leads to a small change and other times it calls for a drastic reimagining. You might guess that when God is involved, a small pivot is usually not acceptable- so, when God is in the pivot, get ready for a drastic change in life.

That's what the Hebrew people experienced when the prophet Isaiah spoke the word of God to them. Isaiah was God's prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah from the time King Uzziah died in 742 BCE to the death of King Hezekiah in 687 BCE. During those fifty-five years, he lived in a time of considerable political and religious turmoil.

Isaiah prophesied mostly in the time of King Ahaz who was a weak and faithless king who forged an alliance with the Assyrian empire which basically made him their puppet. Isaiah confronted the King with a call for social justice, with judgement on corrupt elites, a demand for pure worship and the end of idol worship. And, surprisingly, the prophet also spoke a word of hope. He spoke harsh judgment and buoyant promise. It takes courage to preach hope in the midst of desolation, but that is what Isaiah did.

In chapter seven, Isaiah is arguing with King Ahaz. Isaiah asks him, "Isn't it bad enough that you weary humans. Must you weary God as well?" And then the prophet offers a word of hope. He tells the king that the sign from God will be a child. And this child will arrive in the near future, his mother is already pregnant. Some scholars believe Isaiah was speaking of the Queen, the wife of Ahaz and the child would be his son, Hezekiah. Of course, in the New Testament this prophecy is connected to the arrival of Jesus. I see no reason why it cannot be appropriate for both.

Isaiah speaks of light in a time of tremendous darkness and fear for God's people. The mighty Assyrian empire is breathing down their neck. Isaiah's greatness as a prophet lies in the religious perspective from which he viewed the international political scene. He

believed that God is in control and all nations are called to serve God's purposes- even if they don't know it.

When the child of the prophecy, Hezekiah, finally takes his seat on King David's throne he is celebrated as one of the best kings they ever had. He was a wise and faithful leader and brought about a great religious reformation.

Isaiah, the eighth century prophet, shows us that the good news is this: in the shadows of the empire, God is at work in the world, bringing about salvation through the restoration of a compassionate order of justice. Open your eyes and see, he calls, the light has overcome the darkness. Pivot so that you may live a life worthy of God. Because, with God everything is possible- even freedom from oppression.

We pivot now to the Gospel of Matthew and find the adult Jesus who has recently been baptized by his cousin, John. Jesus has passed his trials in the wilderness and the next thing we hear is quite ominous. John has been arrested. It is then that the public ministry of Jesus begins. John is the last of the old prophets and the first of the gospel preachers. He has been preparing the people for the arrival of Jesus. He has been baptizing and calling people to pivot- to turn around, to repent, and to prepare themselves for God's Messiah. His arrest and removal from the scene mark the beginning of God's new age- the age of Jesus.

Matthew tells us that Jesus settled in Capernaum by the sea. Then Matthew quotes Isaiah, *"the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."* Do you see the connection? Matthew's congregation of Jewish Christians needed to hear their familiar Hebrew scriptures, to help make sense of their new reality. By quoting Isaiah, Matthew tells them that this Jesus is the one promised by God centuries before. Every move Jesus makes is in accordance with God's plan.

Jesus begins to preach and the first thing he says is an exact quote from John. *"Repent, for the reign of heaven has come near."* Jesus is basically saying, *"Pivot! Turn around! Turn back to God because God's reign is here- right now! It is so close you can reach out and touch it!"*

Matthew will spend the rest of his gospel unpacking the meaning of that one sentence- "the reign of heaven has come near." For now, Matthew wants us to know that the reign of heaven, the empire of God, has arrived and it will change everything. It is a cause for repentance. It demands a reversal of direction.

You could get whiplash in these few verses- because very quickly we find Jesus calling his first disciples. Except for a brief mention in chapter nine, when Jesus calls Matthew, the tax collector, this is the only time in the first gospel that we see Jesus calling his disciples. If you want to see what pivot means in real life, just look at what happens here. Jesus is walking on the beach and sees two brothers, Simon and Andrew, they are fishermen. He calls out to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Pivot! And they do it! Immediately they drop their nets, and they go with him.

This is tough for us to fathom. Why did they go with him so quickly? Did they know who he was? Did they tell their families they were leaving? How would they support themselves? How would their families manage without them? Matthew doesn't care about the answers to any of our questions. He tells us all that he thinks we need to know. Jesus called out to two sets of brothers, "Follow me." And they did. He could have called out "Pivot" because they certainly did that.

They turned around, turned away from life as they knew it and followed a guy they had just met. Who does that?

*Matthew wants us to know, in the words of Tom Long, "Jesus disrupts family structures and disturbs patterns of working and living. He does so, not to destroy, but to renew. Peter and Andrew do not cease being brothers; they are now brothers who do the will of God. James and John do not cease being sons; they are now not only children of Zebedee but also children of God. All four of these disciples leave their fishing nets, but they do not stop fishing. Their past has not been obliterated; it has been transformed by Jesus's call to follow." (1)*

As soon as they say, "yes," Jesus begins his ministry. In just three verses we see, in microcosm, the major themes of his ministry in the Gospel of Matthew. Verse 23 tells us what we need to know. It is a ministry of word and deed- teaching, preaching, and healing. His ministry is about the mind, the body, and the spirit.

Jesus is concerned about the totality of human life. And it all points to God and what the reign of God looks like. Matthew gives us details about where he goes and what he does to show that Jesus was reaching people throughout the known world. He was healing and preaching and teaching crowds of Jews and Gentiles. Those living in the heavy, dangerous shadow of another empire hear a word of light and hope through the ministry of Jesus.

Most religious people expected the Messiah to be revealed in Jerusalem- the center of religious, political, cultural, and economic activity for the Jewish people. Instead, he begins his ministry in the backwater towns of Galilee. That was no surprise to those who knelt at his manger in the stable in Bethlehem. God's revelation of Jesus- beginning with

the announcement of his birth to his mother- happens in unexpected places among ordinary, faithful people.

Matthew's purpose in this text is to show that the proclamations and actions of Jesus reflect his conviction that God desires to establish a reign of justice in the world, in a way that contradicts the logic of the empire. The good news of God's empire is for those most marginalized and oppressed by human empires. If it does not seek justice, then it has nothing at all to do with God. One of the responsibilities of the church today is to be vigilant about our tendency to lose the gospel's anti-imperial edge. If our message offends no one in power; if it offers no sustaining hope for the weakest and most vulnerable in the world, then it is not the good news of Jesus.

Discipleship demands that we offer our wholehearted allegiance to God's rule; to God's divine power to make all things right. Jesus's call to the four fishermen wasn't a call to a future salvation, but to present action- they weren't going off to think and talk about the future- they were going to jump right in, follow Jesus, and find out what he meant by "fishing for people." If that isn't a pivot, I don't know what is.

*"Jesus's message and presence have never been good news for those who are deeply invested in the preservation of the current order, or who benefit from the imbalances of human social, political, and economic arrangements. For those who suffer under these systems, however, the message of the Gospel generates hope, vision, and renewed life, which in turn fuels their participation in and realization of God's presence and power." (2)*

If we authentically and enthusiastically answer the call of Jesus to follow him, we have no choice but to Pivot. That doesn't mean that our lives are bad as they are right now. What it means is that Jesus is always calling us onward, calling us to move forward in our faith in God and in our relationships with one another. The call of Jesus isn't a once and done thing. I believe that we are called over and over again throughout our lives to new understandings, new places, new situations.

The good news is this: in the shadows of the empire, Jesus Christ is at work in this world, bringing about salvation through the restoration of a compassionate order of justice and peace. And he is calling us to participate in God's work.

My prayer for us is that we would know when to pivot and to live as though we believe the reign of God is so close that we can touch it! May it be so. Amen.

End Notes:

- MATTHEW, Thomas G. Long. Westminster John Knox Press. 1997. P. 43.

- PREACHING THE *GOSPEL OF MATTHEW*, Stanley P. Saunders. Westminster John Knox. 2010. P. 28.