

“Weeping,” writes the psalmist, “lingers in the evening, but joy comes with the morning.”

Every good story has a turning point. Every good story has a moment when the drama shifts, the tide turns, and the narrative heads in a new direction. Every good detective story, for example, has that initial stalled and frustrated plot where none of the pieces seem to add up and the gumshoe detective has all these loose threads of evidence that don't tie together and then there comes that moment when out of the blue the pivotal clue appears and the dots begin to connect and the pieces start to fit – and there is this turning point where the right trail is discovered and justice is seems closer at hand.

Every good story has a turning point. And I suppose that goes not just for a good story – but also for a good history. History is replete with turning points.

In the middle of 1863 as the Civil War waned longer than anybody ever dreamed and the Union seemed unable to bring to a finish the effort to abolish slavery and protect the union – and as the Confederates pressed their forces further and further into the north – the two armies met at Gettysburg and no one really knew what those three days of battle would bring, maybe just more war -- but what they brought was the turning point. The high water mark of the war – where the tide turned and the Union gained the advantage and the events to follow seemed to take an inevitable course toward a Union victory. Still long coming – and many battles still to be fought and won and lost – but the tide had turned. They had arrived at the turning point.

80 years later when armies of the Third Reich swarmed across Europe all seemed lost. No Army, no Navy, No Air Force seemed to be able to stop the advance, and civilization felt as if it hung in the balance. But then came June 6, 1944 – D-day – and tens of thousands of brave young Allied men

stormed the beaches of Normandy and pushed the Nazi's back and put them on the run and the tide had turned. The Turning Point had occurred and though there were months still left in the war, the war was on its way to being over.

A dozen years later when the shadows of Jim Crow laid heavy upon the land and black people suffered under the cruel hand of institutional prejudice where they couldn't drink from the same water fountains and sit at the same lunch counters and apply for the same jobs – on December 1, 1955 in Birmingham, Alabama a local seamstress boarded a bus and sat in the first row of the rear “colored section”. But a few stops later when the whites only section filled up and the bus driver asked her to give up her seat Rosa Parks stayed put and refused to move. And people say that was the Turning Point, that was when the tide began to ebb, that was when the course of history began to change and go in a new direction. And while we have a long ways to go the arc of history is bending toward justice.

Every good story, every good history, has a turning point.

A case can certainly be made that the turning point of human history resides in the story I just read to you from the New Testament. A story of three days. If the Bible is to be believed it is these three days that serve as the turning point of the great story of human civilization. Jesus kept talking throughout his ministry about these three days – the three days when the Son of Man would suffer under Pontius Pilate, be crucified, dead and buried and on the third day rise again. Jesus kept talking and talking about it. And no one really knew what he was talking about. No one really understood how the story was going to go. No one could really pick up on the clues. No one had any idea of the turning point that awaited them. But then come the three days and Luke when he tells the story turns our attention to a group of women who stumble through the three days the

best they know how. They have loved their Jesus. They have loved the rabbi from Galilee. They had hoped that his teaching and his signs were going to redeem Israel. But now in these three days the days had grown dark, the rabbi had been arrested, the disciples had fled and the Romans had nailed Jesus to a tree. No pieces seemed to fit, no dots connected, no loose ends tied together and there were these women all alone at the cross, all alone preparing spices for the dead Jesus, all alone and resting on the Sabbath, and all along walking to the tomb. They don't really know that are in the middle of the turning point. They don't really know that the hinge of human history resides on the door of the tomb. They don't know that with the sun's rise the light of the world will be dawning on the entire human race. They don't know any of this – the only thing they know is that they have a job to do. They have a rabbi to follow, they have a rabbi under whose cross they are to stand, they have a rabbi to lay in a tomb, they have a rabbi to prepare spices and ointment for, and they have a rabbi whose grave they knew they need to visit.

You see there is one thing about a turning point – you can't have a turning point unless you have players. You can't have a story without characters. You can't have a play without actors. You can't have a turning point unless you have what is referred to in Latin as *dramatis personae*. You can't have a turning point unless you have a protagonist, unless you have characters who are

looking for the turn in the story. Who are enacting the turn in the story. You have to have a detective before you can find the clue. You have to have soldiers to storm the beach. You have to have a woman to stay seated on the bus. You have to have a group of women at the cross, at the tomb, preparing spices and walking in the pre-dawn shadows to find an empty tomb. You have to have the *dramatis personae*. You have to have people who are willing to endure the darkness in the hopes of a rising sun. You have to have people who know that weeping will linger for the evening, but that joy will come in the morning.

You see the joy that Spirit has to give – the fruit of joy – is a gift for the long term. The gift of joy is a gift that comes with hope. It is gift that comes with the belief that somewhere ahead of us is a turning point. We do what we have to do right now, because there will be joy in the morning. Which makes those three days in Palestine such the turning point for you and me – because to embrace those days, to believe those days, to calibrate our lives around those days is to believe that no matter how poorly we feel the narrative is going within us and around us – there is this God of human history – who has the ability to turn the course of time on a dime.

And God does turn the course of time on a dime, and often that dime is you and me. You see, this is one of the great joys of living – knowing

**“THIS IS ONE OF THE GREAT JOYS OF LIVING - KNOWING GOD CREATED YOU AND ME FOR A MEANING AND A PURPOSE.”**

Luke 23:50 - 24:12

# Joy in the time of COVID

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell  
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that God created you and me for a meaning and a purpose. That we get to be the *dramatis personae* – the characters in the drama of redemption and that the great joy of living comes when we know our part. That though there is weeping in the evening, there will be joy in the morning.

Remember the story of Joseph Dutton? Veteran of the Civil War. Union soldier. But the outcome of the war brought him little joy for what was to follow was the discovery of his wife's unfaithfulness, eventual divorce, the descents of depression and the perils of the bottle. And the shell of a man stumbles around weeping in the evening until he stumbles upon a gracious Roman Catholic community who take him in, dry him up and put him back into the drama of life. And with each new day a yearning grows to wonder what the meaning of his life is all about. And then he starts reading and hearing stories of good Father Damien out on the Hawaiian Islands who was ministering to the lepers of Molokai. And that was it. Uninvited, he travels by land and sea to Molokai and unannounced arrives and says to Father Damien "I'm here to help and I'm here to stay." And stay he did to care for those lepers for the rest of his days. Late in life and writing in his journal Brother Dutton reflects on the drama of his life – the horrible first act and the victorious second half – and he writes: "Did ever one deserve so little and get so much?"

Every good story has a turning point. Weeping lingers in the evening, but joy comes with the morning.

Do you remember Gordon Wilson? Gordon Wilson lived in Belfast, Ireland. He was a Northern Ireland Protestant. And that is what took him one day along with his 20 year old daughter Marie to a Protestant celebration outside of Belfast to honor the war dead on Veteran's Day. In the middle of that celebration the IRA set off a bomb that buried Gordon and his daughter under five feet of broken concrete. The two of them survived the initial blast and could hear and see each other

under the rubble. Marie grabbed her daddy's hand and said, "Daddy, I love you very much." They were her last words. She slipped into unconsciousness and died in the hospital a few hours later. Weeping lingers in the evening.

When they pulled the sheet over his precious daughter's face this good Methodist father had to figure out what the meaning of life was. So when he stepped out of the hospital and in front of the microphones -- when the world expected to hear anger and insults and names and despair and hopelessness -- Gordon Wilson said, "I have lost my daughter, but I bear no grudge. Bitter talk is not going to bring Marie Wilson back to life. I shall pray, tonight and every night, that God will forgive those who killed her." He took his place on the stage and starting living into the turning point. Because it was on that day that this grieving dad began leading a crusade for Protestant-Catholic reconciliation. He wrote a book about his daughter, spoke out against violence, and constantly repeated the phrase, "Love is the bottom line." He met with the IRA, forgave them for what they did, and asked them to lay down their arms. History has deemed him a catalyst for peace. The Republic of Ireland made him a senator. When he died suddenly in 1995 the Irish Republic, Northern Ireland and Great Britain honored this man who turned the tide.

You see the truth is – life is unfair and life is uncertain. And if we ever needed proof for that it came with the year 2020. What a crazy and difficult and tumultuous and uncertain and sickly and deadly and lonely year. All wrapped up into one. And we still have 2 and 1/2 months to go! And we've all been affected. And we've all lost something. And we've all wondered maybe what is this supposed to be for us? The evening of COVID lingers and what must I do with my weeping? What must I do as I stumble through the dark shadows of the early morning? When will come the turning point? Who's to know. But you can't have a turning point without the characters. Weeping lingers for the evening, but joy comes in the morning.

It makes me think of the story of Tony Melendez. Tony Melendez was the Nicaraguan boy who was born with no arms. What's a boy do with no arms? What's a boy with no arms do but receive the stares of other kids? Weep in the evening. So Tony's family immigrated to East Los Angeles and for whatever reason he decided that maybe he could learn to play the guitar with his feet. And so he did. I don't know how that happens, but Tony learned to play guitar with his feet. He didn't just learn to play the guitar with his feet; he turned out to be better with his feet than most were with their hands. When the Pope visited Los Angeles Tony was invited to play for the Pope. And so before a crowd of tens of thousands, Tony took to the stage, the *dramatis personae*, and played his guitar. And the visibly moved Pope wrapped him in his arms. In his book, Tony recalls, "After the concert I walked backstage through the waiting crowd of old friends and new ... and I saw a badly deformed young woman in a wheelchair. Her arms and legs were twisted, but she smiled and tried to wave as I passed. And her eyes filled with tears. She reached her hand out toward me and struggled to speak, 'Tony,' she said, 'because of you, we all have hope.'"

Because of you, we all have hope. And because of those women stumbling in the dark, knocking their shins on gravestones – because of their part in the play – we all have hope. COVID will not have the last word. There is another act to come. And the director is looking for characters for the next scene. Now is the casting call. As shadowed as the first act may be, we all have a part to play. Because this is the good story and every good story has its turning point. Weeping may linger for the evening, but joy comes with the morning.



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