

“A Change of Heart”

Participant’s Guide for the 2021 Lenten journey at North Lake

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Psalm 51:10**

Lent is a season for changed hearts. The forty days leading up to Holy Week and Easter have for centuries been regarded as a time of preparation and deep reflection. If we proceed through Lent without any change spiritually, without any change at the center of our being, without any movement closer to the Lord, we are missing the point and the opportunity of Lent.

We all use the word “heart,” knowing it signifies more than a vital organ, a muscle pumping blood through our bodies. The ancients regarded the heart as the essence of a person, not merely a bundle of emotions. Scripture understands the heart as the source of human will and action. Jesus recognized the human heart produces good and evil (Luke 6:45). Therefore, a change of heart is transformation at the very center of who we are.

Heart-change is not a superficial adjustment. It is the core of our identity, which is why we are told to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). Experiencing heart-change is an overhaul, not routine maintenance. It more closely resembles getting a new engine for your car, rather than a simple oil and filter change.



Of course, it is natural for us to resist a change of heart, unless we are in considerable distress. We typically prefer the status quo, until something stimulates or prods us to change. This is true in basic habits like where we park, sit, eat, and congregate. How much truer that is with heart-change. We guard our hearts; interior transformation is protected by our strongest security measures. Yet Jesus does his best work in soul-deep alterations. So, while we resist, the Lord waits for access and the opportunity to change our hearts. We often allow access to God in the midst of a major life change or crisis.

Our North Lake focus during Lent 2021 will explore in some depth:

1. **Psalm 51** – the penitent prayer offered by David after his adultery with Bathsheba, his murderous conspiracy against her husband Uriah, and the dramatic confrontation with Nathan the prophet (see 2 Samuel 11:1 – 12:15), and
2. The **Parable of the Prodigal Son** (Luke 15:11-32).

*All scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

In the Sunday messages of Lent we will also consider the story of **Stan Ciepielinski** (the father of my daughter-in-law Kelly) who received a heart transplant in May, 2015. Stan and I have spoken many times about his experience, which was not only a dramatic physical change, but also an emotional and spiritual transformation of his life. Stan is nearly finished with a book detailing the past six years, and he has given me permission to share his story with North Lake.

Our progression through the five weeks of Lent will be:

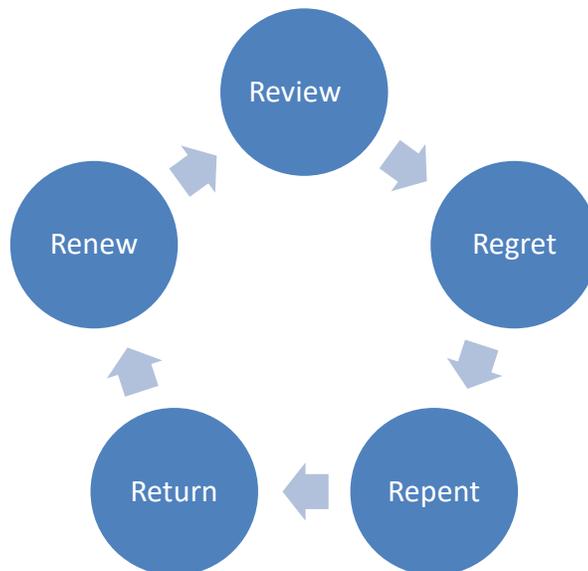
| ■ Review | ■ Regret | ■ Repent | ■ Return | ■ Renew |
|-------------|-------------|----------|----------|----------|
| February 21 | February 28 | March 7 | March 14 | March 21 |

These steps are based on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but they are not necessarily linear or experienced in that order by everyone.

This participant’s guide contains material to supplement the worship messages, including questions and suggestions for your own heart-inspection and renewal. I encourage you to write down your thoughts and prayers. You may also find it beneficial to participate in a discussion group or discuss these questions with those closest to you.

May God use this Lenten season to change us from the inside out, to give us a clean heart, to install a new and right spirit, so we resemble more and more the one whom we proclaim and follow, Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory forever!

Rev. Dr. Jeffrey A. Hosmer
North Lake Presbyterian Church, Lady Lake, FL



“Review” – Sunday, February 21

Introspection means to look within oneself. Greek philosopher Socrates advised, “Know thyself.” Our capacity for self-reflection and self-awareness is one of our essential human traits.

Scripture also prescribes self-examination. Sometimes that is a group activity, a people collectively inspecting themselves, as in Lamentations 3:40:

***Let us test and examine our ways,
and return to the Lord.***

Other times it is a personal introspection, like the psalmist in 77:6.

***I commune with my heart in the night;
I meditate and search my spirit.***

The prior verses in Psalm 77 reveal two more things about his introspection. First, it was prompted by hardship of some kind that was keeping him awake.

***You keep my eyelids from closing;
I am so troubled that I cannot speak. (77:4)***

Second, he was old enough to be looking back many years.

***I consider the days of old,
and remember the years of long ago. (77:5)***

Life review is natural and important as we age. It is one dimension of the spiritual work we undertake later in life.

What is also clear from scripture is that even if we do not review our own lives, God is conducting the review all the while. Psalm 139 acknowledges this at the start.

***O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Lord, you know it completely. (139:1-4)***

The Lord’s review is even more penetrating and comprehensive than our self-review.

Furthermore, if we are not inclined to ask ourselves the tough questions, to hold ourselves accountable, God has many ways to provoke a deeper self-reflection. He sent a prophet to confront King David. The dire circumstances of the Prodigal Son stirred a long, hard look inside of himself. For many, self-review comes with a medical crisis, a major loss, a disruption in our normal patterns of life ... perhaps even a pandemic.

Lent is a period of preparation for Holy Week. Through the centuries many have regarded it as a pilgrimage through time, through the weeks leading to Easter, with every Sunday representing a waystation or mini-Easter along the way. In this first week of our journey, entitled A Change of Heart, we focus on our practice of self-review.

Questions for personal reflection and discussion:

1. When have you spent time reflecting on your life path, choices, habits, and faithfulness? What circumstances have prompted your self-examination? Are you more likely to reflect in a time of calm or crisis? In a time of leisure or busyness? In a sleepless night or a mid-daydream? Has your reflection been triggered by a film, music, or a book you're reading? Does your reflection connect to when you are reading scripture or praying?
2. At this stage of your life, are your moments of self-reflection occurring more frequently, less frequently, or about the same as before? What do you think that means?
3. How are others involved in your self-review? Do you discuss what you're thinking or feeling with a family member, friend, supervisor, mentor, teacher, counselor, spiritual director, small group, or anyone else? How important is it for you to consult with others in the process of evaluating yourself and your life-choices?
4. For this exercise, get a hand-held mirror large enough to show your entire face, or stand in front of a mirror. For a full minute or more, look at your own image in the mirror. This is not time to shave, fix your hair, or check your make-up. Look intently at yourself. Go eye-to-eye with your own soul. What do you see? How does that make you feel?
5. The four quadrants of the Johari Window, mentioned in the message, are based on two perspectives: how you see yourself and how others see you.
 - a. Consider what is in the OPEN quadrant, visible both to you and others. What do you see in yourself that others tend to affirm or recognize?
 - b. What do you keep in the HIDDEN quadrant, known to you, but concealed from others? Is there something hidden that you can and should disclose to someone else?
 - c. Theoretically, you have a BLIND SPOT, a quadrant that others see but you cannot see yourself. If you are bold, ask two or three people—who know you well and whom you trust—what they see in your blind spot? If you don't do this, why not? If you do try this, how does it feel and what do you learn?
 - d. One quadrant is unobserved by you or anyone else, except for God. Contemplate that MYSTERY quadrant for a moment. What might the Lord see in you that has not yet surfaced in your life? How do you feel about a MYSTERY zone within you, unobserved, undetected, but something you might tap into or display in the future?
6. What is the hardest area of your life to review? What self-reflection subject or dimension do you most resist or avoid? How do you want to approach that difficult zone during this Lenten season of reflection?
7. In what ways can the Lord help you with your self-review, especially in the zone that is most difficult and sensitive? How well do your prayers invite God's involvement, including the Lord's assessment? How open are you truly to a change in heart?

“Regret” – Sunday, February 28

In the first step of “Review” we considered the self-examination of our lives. How do we see and evaluate the decisions, actions, and habits that form our identity? This is a matter of perception. How clearly and accurately do we see ourselves? The review process is ongoing. But a second step in *A Change of Heart* is regret, which is a feeling more than a perception.

Regret is a feeling of distress or loss concerning something in the past. Linguists suggest the ancient root meaning of regret is tied up with sorrow, lament, or weep. For our purposes in this series, regret is how we feel after our life-review has turned up something undesirable in our character or behavior. We may regret something we’ve said or done, or the way something turned out that we never intended.

A careful reading of scripture reveals that the feeling of regret is even attached to God. For example, before the cataclysmic flood that only Noah and his family survived, Genesis 5:6 says, **“And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.”** After the flood, the Lord established a covenant with Noah, promising that never again would he **“curse the ground because of humankind,”** never again would he unleash such destruction, because God realized **“the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth”** (Genesis 8:21). God acknowledged that such an extreme measure as the great flood was not an effective remedy for the problem of human evil. We may infer a tinge of regret in God’s after-the-flood reflection. In similar fashion, after Saul’s reign as king went awry, 1 Samuel 15:35 declares, **“And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.”**

This raises the thorny question of whether or not God ever makes mistakes. Does God take any action without knowing ahead of time the consequences? Didn’t God already know the outcome before he created humankind or made Saul the king? Perhaps the inspired Old Testament writers were not addressing these pure theological questions, but instead were ascribing to God the universal feeling of regret—just the like the biblical portraits of God displaying anger, jealousy, or other human emotions.

The human feeling of regret is so common, so pervasive, that scripture frames the Lord God with regret when something turns out badly. Certainly many passages suggest God may also have a change of heart. But let’s not get sidetracked on the question of God and regret. The more relevant and immediate question is: what regrets do you have?

When the prophet Nathan confronted David, the sinner-king was immediately regretful. **“I have sinned against the Lord,”** he responded (2 Samuel 12:13). His troubled spirit poured forth in the penitential prayer we know as Psalm 51. We frequently quote selected verses of this psalm. For example, verse 10 is the theme verse accompanying our Lenten series, *“A Change of Heart.”* But take a few moments now to read through the entire psalm, all nineteen verses. Feel the pain and remorse of David as he pleads for mercy and forgiveness. Clearly with this prayer, David is offering the Lord the sacrifice of **“a broken and contrite heart”** (Psalm 51:17).

The Prodigal Son also had a broken and contrite heart after he squandered his inheritance and dropped from the high life to the pigsty. In the midst of a famine, he was feeding hogs but starving himself. In Luke 15:17 Jesus said, **“But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!’”** He was living the results of his immaturity and unbridled desires. He had, in the words of Jesus, come to himself or conducted an honest life review. He rued the day he disrespected his father, demanded an early payoff on his trust fund, and left home. What a waste he had made of his life, which is what *prodigal* means. His statement was saturated in regret.

Our mistakes may not be as obvious and extreme as David and the Prodigal, but can we be honest and vulnerable about our regrets?

Questions for personal reflection and discussion:

1. Some people get a “No regrets” t-shirt or tattoo, thinking that is the way life should be lived. But clinical psychologist Noam Shpancer counters that approach:
Given our complex world, and our long lives, it’s unlikely that any thoughtful person will come out at the end unscathed, unblemished in their decision-making, and regret-free.... In fact, **one could argue that having no regrets is a sign of having not lived fully. Regret is a common human emotion. If you haven’t experienced it, you lack experience; if you haven’t hit that note, you haven’t played all the keys.**¹
Do you agree or disagree with Shpancer’s argument? Why?
2. For both David and the Prodigal Son, their regrets led to a change of heart. How important is the feeling of regret in the process of heart-change? Do you think genuine transformation can take place in our hearts without regret? What would be an example of that kind of regret-free transformation?
3. Suppose regret is a healthy, natural human response to the realization that something you said or did—or left unsaid or undone—had a hurtful or disappointing outcome. Do you recognize this feeling in your own life? Have felt sorry or sorrow for something after-the-fact, or something that did not turn out as you intended and hoped, or something that felt like a missed opportunity? How would you describe your experience of regret?
4. In your journal or notebook for A Change of Heart, try to list at least five major regrets that linger in your memory. Spend a few minutes reflecting on each. What was the cause of the regret? When and how did you recognize the regret? What was the intensity of the regret—how much did it hurt? What was the duration of the regret—how long did it last?
5. Consider how you have processed these and other regrets in your life. How well aware are you of regrets when they surface? Have you voiced them to others, especially to those affected by your actions or inaction? Who can you tell about your regrets? Does the Lord hear from you about your regrets? How do your prayers compare to Psalm 51:1-4?

¹ “Having No Regrets Means Having Not Lived,” *Psychology Today*, December 20, 2019.

“Repent” – Sunday, March 7

Review provides a clear, honest perception of ourselves. Regret is the feeling of remorse for something we have caused or missed. Then Repent is the turning point in A Change of Heart.

David knew the Ten Commandments and what God thought of adultery. Long before Nathan confronted him, he knew he had violated the Law of the Lord. However, apparently, he was beginning to think with a sense of royal privilege, that he was entitled to the woman of his choice, and that he was above the Law. We know David was engaged in some self-review because of his scheme trying to cover up the unwanted pregnancy. He arranged for Bathsheba’s husband Uriah to spend time with her, assuming their sexual encounter would explain away her pregnancy. But the faithful soldier, who considered himself on-duty, refrained from lying with his beautiful wife, showing more self-restraint than the king. David rewarded him with an assignment on the front lines that was surely a death sentence. In a short span of time, David managed to defy at least four commandments (coveting, adultery, murder, and stealing).

The Lord sent Nathan to confront David, and the prophet did so with a clever parable that first enraged and then ensnared the king. When David—who wanted to pose or consider himself a righteous ruler—heard about a rich man taking advantage of a poor man, his anger was stoked. He condemned the rich man who took something precious from the man who had so little. Then came the climactic moment; Nathan said to him, “**You are the man!**”

David replied to Nathan, “**I have sinned against the Lord**” (2 Samuel 12:13). We cannot know how much self-review David did or how much regret he felt before Nathan delivered God’s accusation. When we won’t review ourselves, God still holds us accountable. In that dramatic exchange, David knew instantly that his guilt was exposed. What David did in secret would become public, historic, and recorded for all to know even thirty centuries later.

But also public was his immediate regret and confession. And we have Psalm 51 which expresses his repentance. At the midpoint of his prayer David cried out:

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.** Psalm 51:10

The aftermath of David’s sin was a pivot point in his life, reflecting a sincere desire for change. Earlier in the psalm he requested “**wisdom in my secret heart**” (v. 6). Later he offered the Lord “**a broken and contrite heart**” (v. 17). The entire prayer displayed his repentance. He owned his guilt, made no excuses, humbled himself, and pleaded for mercy.

In the fifteenth chapter of Luke’s Gospel Jesus tells three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost (prodigal) son. The common theme of the three is not lostness, but repentance. Lostness is the condition of human beings without God. But Jesus is trying to help us see that repentance is our joy-producing response in God’s great plan for salvation.

In the first parable when the shepherd returned with the lost sheep, he shouted to his friends and neighbors, **“Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.”** Then Jesus added his commentary: **“I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance”** (Luke 15:6-7).

In the second parable, the woman located her lost coin and announced, **“Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.”** Then Jesus added his commentary, **“I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents”** (Luke 15:9–10).

In the third parable, when the father welcomed home his wayward son, he called for a celebration feast, declaring, **“This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”** Then Jesus added his commentary. But in this case, it wasn’t a tag line about joy for one who repents; it was an extension of the parable, a contrast story about the older brother who refused to celebrate his brother’s return. We don’t know if he ever showed up at the feast. If he did, he probably wasn’t very good company. He portrayed an indignant self-righteousness. He needed repentance himself, but there’s no indication of any self-awareness, humility, or regret.

It’s unlikely we’ll feel any regret without some honest, penetrating review of our lives. It’s unlikely we will repent unless we are feeling regret. So, these two—Review and Regret—combine to produce the repentant moment when a heart is changed.

Questions for personal reflection and discussion:

1. Read Jeremiah 8:6. Can you feel God’s frustration at those who are not honest with him or themselves, who do not repent, who show no sign of regret, who plunge headlong like a war horse into battle? When and why has the Lord perhaps felt that way toward you?

**I have given heed and listened,
but they do not speak honestly;
no one repents of wickedness,
saying, “What have I done!”
All of them turn to their own course,
like a horse plunging headlong into battle.**

Jeremiah 8:6

2. In what ways do you identify with the Prodigal Son? In what ways do you identify with the Elder Brother? In what ways do you identify with the compassionate Father?
3. Describe an occasion when you have asked God to “create in you a new heart.” What were the circumstances? What was the outcome? What inner transformation or spiritual resolution did you experience? If you cannot think of a single occasion when you asked for a new heart, what does that say about your life and relationship with God?
4. In your journal or personal notebook, write down what you think needs to be turned around in your life during this Lent, 2021. What change of heart do you need and seek? Commit that to prayer every day through Easter. Memorize Psalm 51:10 and use that verse as part of your daily prayer.
5. Consider writing your own psalm of repentance, like David did with Psalm 51. How would it reflect your desire and decision for a change of heart?

“Return” – Sunday, March 14

So far we’ve understood that Review is the reflection or examination that yields an accurate self-perception. It brings to the surface the mistakes, flaws, and squandered opportunities of our lives. Regret is the feeling that follows naturally when we acknowledge we are not entirely who we are supposed to be, or where we are supposed to be, or living like we are supposed to live. Review and Regret combine to produce a turning point, when we Repent. Perception and feeling lead to a decision. We are sorry for the negatives—whatever they are—and say so, and we seek a new heart. Repentance is a pivotal moment, like David’s realization that his guilt was exposed, prompting his confession. It’s a pivotal moment like the Prodigal Son’s recognition of the mess he had made out of his life and the confession he prepared for his father. Next comes the Return.

The Prodigal Son envisioned returning home. He resolved to make the journey back from the far country to the familiar setting where he had grown up, even if that meant trading his sonship to be a hired hand. He prepared and rehearsed his confession, what he wanted to say to his father.

Many people get that far, but no further. Frequently we feel sorry and say so, but never demonstrate any enduring change of heart. Many resolve to fix something or live differently, but that gets lost in the fog of the next day’s busyness. Many prepare and envision what they would say in an important exchange with someone they love, but they never get around to doing it, lacking the courage and initiative.

The Prodigal resolved, **“I will get up and go to my father”** (v. 18). Two verses later Jesus said, **“So he set off and went to his father.”** He actually returned. Not knowing how he would be treated, the Prodigal went home to face the consequences with genuine humility. Repentance and Return go together. True repentance can never mean fleeing or avoiding one’s past. The turning point is a decision that puts us in the right direction, but the Return is an action directed toward those we have hurt or disappointed. Return is the follow-through of a new heart desiring reconciliation.

The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous bear some similarity to the teachings of scripture and to the steps identified in this series on heart-change. In fact, the Review-Regret-Repent-Return-Renew cycle—based on the parable of the Prodigal Son—can be creatively compared to parallels in the Twelve Steps. Step 8 is make a list of all persons harmed and be willing to make amends to them all. Step 9 is the actual effort to make amends directly when possible and beneficial to the other. These steps resemble the biblical concept of Return: move in the direction of reconnection and reconciliation. That begins with God and extends to others who’ve been hurt or alienated.

When David prayed in Psalm 51, he was returning to God himself. He was asking the Lord not to give up on him or treat him as disposable. David knew he had offended and alienated God; he desired to be restored to the joy of God’s presence and salvation. Furthermore, having confessed his own transgressions and iniquity, he wanted to make amends. David was in a position to help other transgressors, to teach them and show them the way to return to the Lord.

**Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.** Psalm 51:11–13

David would lead the way for other sinners to return to the Lord. His humility and penitence, his desire for a change of heart, his courage and initiative to plead for mercy, and his pathway of return became an example for others who felt far away from God. He is still teaching and modeling the comeback, showing us how to approach the Holy One when we have made a mess of life. Return!

Questions for personal reflection and discussion:

1. Long before Jesus told the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Old Testament writers emphasized the importance of returning to the Lord. The prophets in particular beckoned the people to return. Here is a short sampler to consider:

**Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.** Isaiah 55:6–7

**Return, O faithless children,
I will heal your faithlessness.
“Here we come to you;
for you are the Lord our God.”** Jeremiah 3:22

**Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God,
for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.
Take words with you and return to the Lord;
say to him,
“Take away all guilt; accept that which is good,
and we will offer the fruit of our lips.** Hosea 14:1–2

**Yet even now, says the Lord,
return to me with all your heart,
with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the Lord, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.** Joel 2:12–13

Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, “How shall we return?” Malachi 3:7

How do you respond to this sampler of statements on returning to God? Which verses particularly strike you? In what ways do they deepen your understanding of Jesus’ parable and the Prodigal’s return to his father?

2. 1 Peter 2:25 says: **“For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.”** How wonderful it would be to hear Peter’s affirmation directed to us personally. But this is curious because we normally consider it the shepherd’s responsibility to go and search for the sheep. In this statement Peter credits the sheep for returning, finding their way back to the shepherd. The lost ones have returned to their caretaker, the guardian of their souls.

In the first two parables of Luke 15, the woman and the shepherd went looking for the coin and the sheep respectively. But in the third parable the father did not go looking for the son who left home. Why do you think that was? Why was it important for the son to return on his own? Who is responsible for your Return, for your movement in the direction of the Father?

3. The Prodigal left home and traveled to **“a distant country”** (v. 13). What does that symbolize to you? Where and how have you been in “a distant country?”
4. Thinking back on what you have said or written in previous weeks about your regrets and desires for a change of heart, what would Return look like for you? What do you want to prepare and say to God? Who else deserves to hear back from you, to hear your attempts to make amends and reconcile?

“Renew” – Sunday, March 21

The Prodigal Son had his self-review, his regrets, his repentance, and his return. He had a new perception of himself. He was sorry for what he had said and done. He had a turning point and made a decision to confess and start over again. He got up and traveled back to his family. There was no guarantee the son would be taken back, even as a hired hand. He was prepared for rejection, prepared for outsider status. **“I am no longer worthy to be called you son”** (v. 21), he said to his father. He had done everything he could, the rest was up to the father.

However, even before the returning son spoke a word, the father’s actions already displayed his paternal response. He ran toward his son, put his arms around him, and kissed him. He didn’t even allow the son to finish the rehearsed confession. Instead, the father interrupted to call for the celebration to begin. The father was more ready to renew the relationship than the son dared to hope. The scene is an enactment of Zephaniah 3:17:

**The Lord, your God, is in your midst ...
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing.**

The father was waiting with love to renew their relationship. At the first sight of the son’s return, the father went running to embrace him. The kiss was a symbol of blessing and the son’s status renewed by the father’s grace. The father was rejoicing and welcoming others to exult with him.

Throughout this series I have referred to the main character of the parable in conventional fashion. Centuries of tradition have labelled him the “PRODIGAL” son, because he squandered his time and money in a foolish, wasteful fashion. But Jesus never defined him as the prodigal son; he only referred to him as the younger son. The father never identified him as “Prodigal Son.” Not even the resentful, elder brother called him the Prodigal. For Jesus and for the father, the son’s identity was not prodigal but precious. The relationship was more important than the misbehavior, especially when the son returned with humility.

The father was eager to renew the sonship of the young man who returned. Restoring that relationship is something only the father could confer. The son was welcomed back by the father’s amazing grace. Some have even referred to him as the “prodigal father” because his love is extravagant, expended fully even on one so wayward. The elder brother certainly thought the father was wasting the fatted calf on a worthless scoundrel. But Jesus was trying to show his listeners how God’s grace is more powerful than our sin. The lost can be found and restored, and that renewal is surely cause for rejoicing.

Authentic renewal is a gift; transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit inside us. We can do everything possible up to a point; our perception, feeling, decision and action are important steps and they are evident to God. But ultimately only the Lord can give us a change of heart. Remember David’s prayer that we’ve been learning and repeating:

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me. Psalm 51:10**

Only God can give that clean heart and new spirit. This echoes in Ezekiel 36:26:

**A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you;
and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.**

When Stan Ciepielinski found out that his own heart was failing irreparably, he was told that he needed a new heart. He could not get that himself. He had to wait. Nothing he did could hasten the process. He had to wait. He could not walk fifteen steps with his old heart. He had to wait. He was not sure if he would get a new heart in time. He had to wait ... and pray ... and trust. He also knew that if he was to receive a new heart it would cost the life of someone else. He had to wait and pray with that knowledge. And when the clean heart came to Stan, the transplant surgery changed him, not only physically, but also emotionally and spiritually. While the surgical team replaced his heart, the Lord also put a new and right spirit within him. Stan understood that he was alive at the price of someone else.

All of us, in our own quiet or desperate ways, need renewal. We need an internal overhaul, a clean heart, a new and right spirit. We approach God with humility, with a plea for mercy. And our heavenly Father wants to restore us; he wants to give us a heart transplant, but it costs the life of another. It costs the Father the life of his own Son. That's how much he loves us. That is the message of Holy Week where our Lenten series concludes. The Cross of Jesus provides us with a new heart and a new spirit. And the Resurrection is the ultimate and forever renewal!

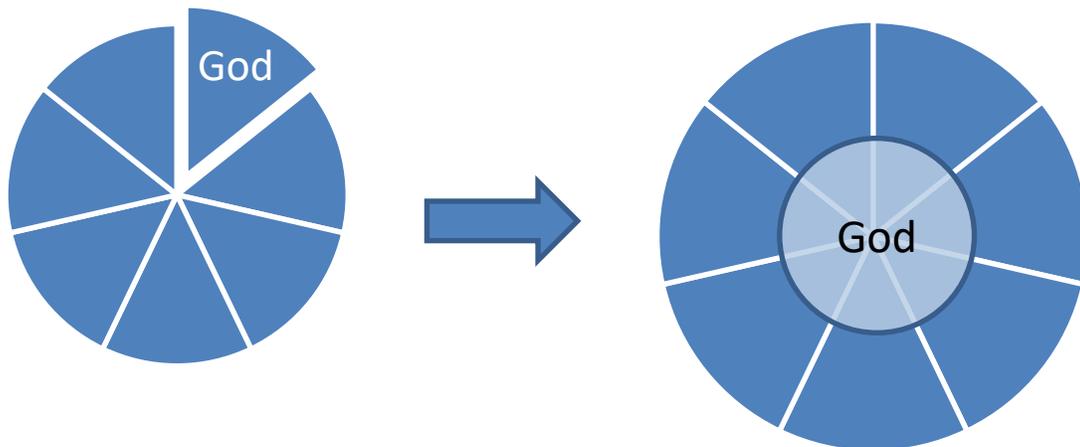
Questions for personal reflection and discussion:

1. When we return, the Father comes running to meet us. Spend a moment with your eyes closed, but your mind focused on that scene. Picture yourself approaching God from a distance. Imagine the Lord hastening to greet you with a joyful look on his face. Receive his embrace of grace, his arms wrapped around you. Feel the press of his lips on your cheek, the kiss that assures you belong to him. Hear him call for the party to start now that you are present. Read this paragraph a second time and then really close your eyes and see how precious you are, not because of anything you've done, but because you are a child of God. Linger in this vision of your Return and God's Renewal.
2. Read Titus 3:3-7 as a commentary or application of the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

³ For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. ⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. ⁶ This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

How does this passage help you to understand the Prodigal Son parable or the chapter in David's life that we've been considering? What stands out to you in these verses, or what aligns with your own life? When and how have you experienced a "renewal by the Holy Spirit?" What does that look like?

3. Jesus was trying to impart and teach grace. He emphasized that our salvation (even our change of heart) is not a human achievement, but a gift from God. He contrasted the humble, grateful prodigal with the self-righteous, "entitled" elder brother. A meritocracy is a system that rewards persons based on their talents and efforts. Do you think the Kingdom of God is organized on a meritocratic basis? Why is grace such a tough message when we think we deserve God's favor? What do we do with our elder-brother-feelings?
4. Perhaps the change of heart we need is the shift from considering our relationship with God as a slice of our lives to having the Lord God at the center of all we are and do.



Many of us think about giving God a slice of our time, our energy, our money, our hearts. What would it look like to have God, not as a slice, but as the core of everything? How much of a heart-change would that be for you?

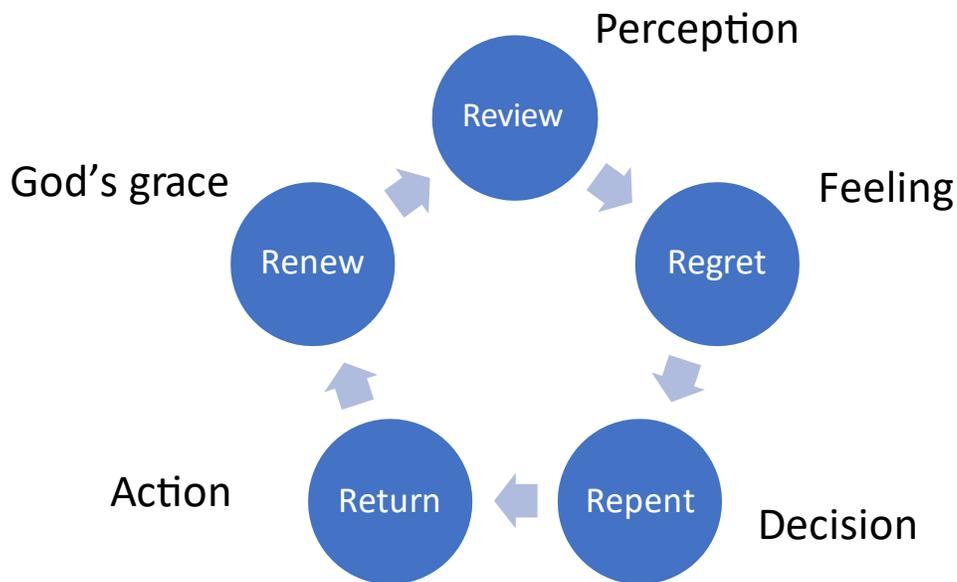
5. Think back on the five weeks of this Lenten season. How do you perceive yourself differently, or do you? What regrets have surfaced and how have you acknowledged them? What turning points or decisions have you made that reflect genuine repentance? How have you sought to return to the Lord? How has the Lord responded to your prayers for renewal and a change of heart? How ready are you for the dramatic Good News of Holy Week?

Conclusion

Recently one of the parents of the Little Blessings Preschool pulled up beside me in the parking lot to ask me a question. I noticed she had a large message on the rear window of the driver's side of her SUV. It read, "If you're still alive, God's not finished with you yet." Of course!

God wasn't finished with David, even after he took a moral nosedive, crashed, and burned in regret. God wasn't finished with the immature prodigal or the smug elder brother. In the Sunday messages we've heard more about transplant patient Stan Ciepielinski. God wasn't finished with Stan when his original heart was failing. Our family has been blessed to see how the Lord continues to work in and through Stan's life. The renewal and transformation process continues, as long we are open to a change of heart.

The steps we have considered – REVIEW – REGRET – REPENT – RETURN – RENEW – are based on the story of the Prodigal Son. They are not necessarily in the same order for everyone. And they certainly don't stop with one cycle. They are ongoing.



Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:16: **“Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.”** God's not finished with us yet. So we continue to reflect on our lives, to examine ourselves critically, to express the honest regrets that come from realizing we are not where we are supposed to be, to repent with fresh resolve, and to journey in the direction of God, returning to the Father who has made us and loved us so. God's not finished with us yet. We see that in the way he welcomes us back. Lent is over, but God's not finished with us yet. And we know this because of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Keep praying for your change of heart.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Psalm 51:10