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Changing Lanes

Isaiah 6:1-10; Luke 5:27-32  
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Today might be the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany in the Christian year, but God calls this Super Bowl Sunday. It is an unusual day when even people like myself who do not even care that much about football, actually sit down to watch an entire game, or at least watch all of the commercials. This is the annual conclusion to our national football frenzy. And this year it is a bit more interesting, because just in case you have been living in a cave in Afghanistan I will tell you that the New Orleans Saints were once a terrible team who have never been to a Super Bowl in their 43 year franchise history. They are the clear underdog, and it has been refreshing to see the hope and confidence they have given the beleaguered city of New Orleans. Whether they win or lose those fans are going to party. I just need to say that from a theological perspective, the Bible talks a whole lot more about saints than it does colts. Jesus rode a colt into Jerusalem, and the only colt in the Old Testament was the braying ass that spoke to the prophet Baalam. So we shall see if the saints go marching out with a Super Bowl victory.

Now, on to the sermon. Four and a half months ago, something happened in the tiny South Pacific island nation of Samoa. Samoa does not get much attention, but this event did attract attention from all over the world. Maybe it was the sheer audacity of the enterprise, but people took notice. Samoa became the first country in more than 40 years to change lanes. That is, Samoa decided that while their drivers had always been tooling down Samoan highways and byways on the RIGHT side of the road, from September 14 forward, they would begin driving on the LEFT side of the road. The government said it wanted to bring the country in line with New Zealand and Australia.

Can you just imagine what that Monday morning last September must have been like? If I was visiting Samoa as a tourist at that time, I would stay in my hotel room for a week. Not only would I be afraid to drive or ride in any sort of vehicle, I would be afraid to walk anywhere too.

Imagine yourself waking up that Monday morning to go to work and trying to remember to drive on the left. If I absolutely had to be somewhere, I would wear a crash helmet and drive 30 miles an hour and pray as I turned every blind corner that the drivers coming my way were going just as slowly and remembered to drive on the left too.

To make this transition as smooth as possible, the Samoan government did its homework. There was a long discussion and debate about this, of course. Then

the government widened the roads to give drivers more room to swerve and avoid hitting each other. They added new signage. They declared a two day national holiday beginning with the day of the switch to reduce traffic. And most important of all, they banned the sale of alcohol for 3 days prior to the switch.

Then they got the church involved. On the Sunday prior to the change, the Christian Church of Samoa, their biggest denomination, prayed for the driving conversion to go smoothly and offered blessings for all those who would be on the roads the next morning. The switch was to take place at 6 am Monday morning. At that time, the Police Minister went on national radio and told drivers to stop and pull over wherever they were. A few minutes later the Prime Minister got on the airwaves to give step-by-step instructions as to how to switch sides to make the conversion complete.

That day there were onlookers lining the streets, cheering and applauding for the drivers putting their lives on the line. The true miracle is that on that first day, not a single accident was reported. Not one!

So why I am telling you all of this? Because I believe that it a very real way what happened in Samoa is a metaphor for what God can do with us. God, through the Holy Spirit, invites us to change lanes, live differently, to see the world and ourselves in a fresh way. The world looks different from the left lane, and it looks different when viewed through the eyes of Christ.

What Jesus taught us about the life God wants us to live is counterintuitive and goes against our habits and inclinations. Living this way is like driving in a different lane. Forgive those who hate you. Pray for those who persecute you. Forget about yourself. Give generously to others, even those who can do nothing for you. Do the thing you think you cannot do. Believe in miracles. Trust in God. Being apprehended anew by this spiritual way of life is the experience of conversion, the process whereby God changes us from the inside out. Sometimes it is dramatic, like Paul on the road to Damascus, but other times it is gradual and progressive, a life long journey of being changed and changed again. It is a process of having our pride, our ego, our pettiness stripped away, until there is nothing left but our true self created in the image of God.

In the Bible, God's call to conversion is often addressed not to the heathens or unbelievers, but to people of faith, the people of God. Throughout history the followers of God would always lapse into laziness, complacency, comfort. Therefore, they were the ones most in need of change, because they thought they knew God. God's people need to be repeatedly shaken up in order to follow God anew. To have the zeal and enthusiasm of a new convert, not a complacent one.

Now there are all kinds of conversions—intellectual, political, emotional,

psychological, to name just a few. But the single most important dynamic of this phenomenon is change, often radical change, and it is usually a change for the better. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James said that religious conversion is a “Change in the habitual center of a person’s mind through which religious ideas take on a central place in a person’s consciousness.” Conversion, being changed from the inside out.

Our Scripture lessons today offer two examples of this, one from Isaiah and one from Luke. The Isaiah text describes the call of Isaiah to become a prophet. The year was roughly 740 BCE, when the death of King Uzziah marked the end of an era of independence for Judah. At this critical juncture, Isaiah has an awe-inspiring vision of God, and beholds the sacredness and power of God in the temple. God speaks, and at the sound of God’s voice the foundation shakes, and the temple is filled with smoke. At this Isaiah feels inadequate and unworthy, and literally fears for his life. He says that he is a man of unclean lips, and instantly an angel comes and touches his mouth with coal from the altar and pronounces that Isaiah is free of guilt and sin. Isaiah has now been set apart. Then God speaks, “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” Almost in spite of himself, Isaiah says: “Here I am, Send me!” It is a stunning moment, when God’s request and Isaiah’s willingness intersect. His willingness to accept God’s call changes his life forever. Standing in the presence of God, Isaiah experiences a religious conversion and is willing to do whatever God asks of him. And God is willing to work in history through this human vessel.

A very different call to conversion is found in our New Testament lesson this week. This story details the call of Levi, but it is much more than the account of calling one disciple. It is the call of Jesus to every person. And it once again reveals the brute fact that Jesus called the outcast, the despised, and the hated. He did not handpick the most religious, virtuous or most popular people of his society as his followers. He built his movement from the castoffs of society, and associated with the worst of the worst. In this passage, Jesus is calling a man named Levi to follow him. Levi was a tax collector, but worse than that. He worked for the Romans collecting tolls, tariffs and customs fees at a toll house. This system was rife with abuse and corruption, and the toll collectors were often not natives of the area where they worked, and their wealth and collusion with the Roman authorities made them targets of deepest hatred. So to this despised toll collector, Jesus cries out, “Follow me!” And more surprisingly, Levi does. He got up, left everything and followed him. He then hosts a great banquet for Jesus at his house, where many other tax collectors are in attendance. Finally the Pharisees can take it no more and ask, “Why do you eat and drink with sinners?” Jesus

offers a stunning reply: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

This is driving down the wrong side of the street. This is an in your face scandal and it confounds everything the Pharisees represent. He is seeking out the most despicable people of all to be his disciples. Is nothing sacred? And the call to Levi is a call for personal commitment to Jesus himself, not to a philosophy or set of teachings. Not for a commitment to a political program, or with the offer of rewards. His call is absolute, unconditional, and personal. And not everyone is willing to make that sort of commitment.

Author Robin Meyers tells the story of a man who began attending church quite regularly. He absorbed everything he could, and attended classes after the service. He asked very intelligent questions and read spiritual literature. This went on for 6 months, and when he was invited to join the church he told Dr. Meyers that he would not be able to become a member. Dr. Meyers said, “That is interesting because you understand the Christian faith better than 99% of the people who do join this church. What is holding you back?” The man replied, “Pastor I get it. I just can’t do it.”

Following the path of Jesus is a radical invitation to be transformed. To be changed from the inside out. To turn around and follow that grace, that goodness that compels us to live a very different sort of life. And if it does not seem very, very strange, then it is not true change.

Conversion. It involves a radical change of heart and mind and very often a change of community. You once ate ice cream every night while sitting in front of the TV. Now you go to the gym. You were once a part of a drinking crowd. Now you go to AA meetings. You were once an agnostic. Now you go to church. Conversion. Being changed from the inside out, is something God alone can do.

If you want with all your heart to be made new, then that is something God can do. So today, I am not asking you to drive home in the left lane, please don’t! But do pull yourself over. Pray. Listen. Learn. Love. See things differently. For our God is making all things new.

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