

Melanie Rosa
Lakewood UMC

“Change is Good: You Go First”

January 14, 2007
Exodus 16: 1-8

I would like you to take just a moment right now to reflect upon your life. Specifically, think about the momentous events that have shaped you as a person. Those things that have transformed you and made you the person you are today. Think of the joyful events: a birth, marriage, a trip, a celebration. Think of the tragic events: illness, disease, death or divorce. All of the great events of our lives, both joyful and sorrowful are circumstances which resulted in change. Sometimes it is a change we have chosen, and it is something we can wholeheartedly embrace. Other times it is a change that we have not chosen and it is thrust upon us and we have a very hard time accepting it. Either way, change is exciting, exhilarating, difficult and disruptive. Inside every change is a blessing.

Change is defined as the transition that occurs when something goes from staying the same, to becoming very, very different. Change is marked by distinct qualities of impermanence and flux. It is a leap into the unknown, and I think that is precisely why change is so challenging for us. In some respects it resembles falling off a cliff, jumping into the void.

Our culture values change, in fact changes in fashion, cars, homes, tastes and technology are what keep our economy moving. We are encouraged to change everything often to keep up with the latest trends and styles.

And yet, contrary to the title of my sermon, change is not always good, nor is it always necessary. Some changes you and I will face in life will be immensely painful and unsettling. They will cause our lives to go in an entirely different direction from what we had planned. They may cause us to feel anger and helplessness. The hardest changes of all are the things we cannot control. A diagnosis of disease or cancer, being fired from a job, being rejected by someone we trusted and cared about, or decisions that we were not a part of, but will have an impact upon us, are all very difficult to accept.

God promises four things in life, according to Tim Hansel who has lived with terrible pain for the past thirty years from a climbing accident. He says that God promises: peace, power, purpose, and trouble. If you seek these things from God, they will be yours for the taking. Peace, power, purpose, and, in the case of trouble, you do not even need to seek, because trouble will surely find you whether you look for it or not.

The story we heard from the book of Exodus reminds us how difficult and traumatic change can be, even positive change. The Israelites have just been set free by God from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. Moses has led them out of slavery into the wilderness where they will wander for a long time until they learn to really trust God and not just trust in themselves. But even though they are now free, they still have a captivity mentality, and there in the wilderness they are getting scared and worried about what they will eat and who will take care of them.

In the passage we read from the 16th chapter of Exodus, they were so frightened by the change Moses had led them into, they were willing to go back to the familiar routine of being slaves in order to avoid the uncertainty of the wilderness and freedom. It's quite touching, really. They cry out to Moses and Aaron, "Why didn't God let us die in the comfort of Egypt, where we had food to eat? Now we are free in the wilderness and hungry. We want to go back home." They would literally rather die than experience this uncertain and difficult change.

Needless to say, I am praying that we are not like the Israelites on their way to freedom in the promised land, who would rather die than change. You know me, I just want everyone to be happy and positive all the time. We really do have such a special and wonderful congregation, and we have had such an effective ministry here, that it is extremely hard to see anything change!

Change is not easy for any of us. I realize that the outcome of the congregational vote is very hard for some of you. While 187 of you voted to relocate this church, 94 of you did not. 94 of you voted to remain here and nearly 300 of our members did not bother to vote at all. Those of you who voted no, must feel very disappointed today. I know this is not the future some of you would have chosen for our congregation, and you are not happy. But I am asking you to have the integrity to stay with us, work with us, and help us be a church of which we can all be proud. Don't walk away just because you did not get your way. Help us be the sort of church you believe God is calling us to be. We need your input and participation in this process every step of the way.

Because we are a family of faith, because God is our sure foundation and reason for existence, we need to stay together and remain faithful. We will not always agree, and the months ahead will undoubtedly present many challenges for us. It will be like leaping off a cliff in some ways.

The good news is that you could not have better church leaders representing you. Your Visioning/Capital Campaign Team has worked so hard, and operated with complete integrity. There were no preconceived notions, no biases or hidden

agendas. We did precisely what you asked us to do. We had hoped to work ourselves right out of a job, but now it appears that our work has just begun. Know that we greatly value your input in this process, and on February 4 we will be hosting a Brunch at 12:00 noon to hear your ideas and concerns.

I am convinced that if we remain faithful to God and true to each other, we will be blessed. And God will be glorified, allowing us be an even greater blessing in this world. Eventually our location will change, but some things will not change. We will continue our strong commitment to Christ, our passion for missions and outreach, children and youth. We will continue our commitment to high quality worship, pastoral care, and Christian Education. We will continue to offer a practical, intelligent and inclusive approach to religion, as we welcome all people in Jesus name. We will continue to care about the lost, the forgotten, the poor, and with God's help we will be able to do even more to help those in need. God will be with us every step of the way.

There once lived a man who considered himself nothing more than a Baptist preacher. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would change American society and be the youngest person ever to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. But he considered himself just a humble preacher, who trusted in God.

In April, 1968, Dr. King went to Memphis to speak on behalf of striking sanitation workers. His speech there would be his last, for he was assassinated shortly thereafter. In the course of that speech he told about a much earlier attempt on his life, which brought him very close to death. He said,

“Several years ago I was in New York City autographing the first book I had written. While sitting there signing books a demented black woman came up. I heard her ask, “Are you Martin Luther King?” I was looking down writing, and I said “Yes.” The next second I felt something in my chest. I had been stabbed by this woman. I was rushed to Harlem Hospital. That blade went deep, and the X-rays revealed that the tip of the blade was on the edge of my aorta, the main artery. Once your aorta is punctured, you drown in your own blood, that's the end of you. The next morning the *New York Times* had an article about the stabbing and the article said that if I had sneezed, I would have died. After the operation and recovery, I was allowed to read the mail that had come in from all over the world. Kind letters, from the President and Vice President and the governor of New York, but one I will never forget. This letter was from a young girl at White Plains High School. It said simply, “Dr. King, I am a 9th grade student at White Plains High School. I know it does not matter, but I would like to mention that I am a white

girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune. And I read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. I am writing to you just to say that I am so happy you did not sneeze.” Dr. King went on to say:

“And I too, am happy I did not sneeze. Because if I had I would not have been around in 1960 when students all over the south started sitting at lunch counters. I knew that as they were sitting in, they were really standing up for the best in the American dream. If I had sneezed, I would not have been here in 1963 when the black people of Birmingham, Alabama aroused the conscience of this nation and brought about the Civil Rights Bill. If I had sneezed, I would not have had a chance that same year to tell America about a dream I had. If I had sneezed, I would not be in Memphis tonight to see a community rally around those brothers and sisters who are suffering. I am so happy that I did not sneeze.”

Martin Luther King did not take credit for his survival or his actions. He gave the credit to God, writing in his autobiography: “If I demonstrated unusual calm during the attempt on my life, it was certainly not due to any extraordinary powers that I possess. Rather, it was due to the power of God working through me. Throughout this struggle for racial justice I have constantly asked God to remove all bitterness from my heart and give me the strength and courage to face anything that came my way. This constant feeling of dependence upon God has given me the feeling that I have divine companionship in this struggle.”

He endured some traumatic changes and terrible setbacks, but through it all Dr. King knew that God was with him. Trusting in God did not give him a long life, but it was a life well lived. The peace of God never failed him, and allowed him to bring about lasting change the world.

The peace of God does not fail. It is my earnest prayer that we will allow God to work in and through us, that God will remove all bitterness from our hearts, and give us the strength and courage to face whatever comes our way. For the last 125 years God has been blessing and guiding this congregation. God will do it again this year and the next and the next, and God will do it long after all of us are gone. Change is coming, whether we like it or not. But we are in this together, my friends and we will see the promised land, one way or another. Our God abides and endures, and has promised to be with us every step of the way. Thanks Be To God.