

Time for Change

Now when Jesus heard that John was arrested, he went to Galilee. He left Nazareth and settled in Capernaum, which lies alongside the sea in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali. This fulfilled what Isaiah the prophet said:

*Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
alongside the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles,
the people who lived in the dark have seen a great light,
and a light has come upon those who lived in the region and in shadow of death.*

From that time Jesus began to announce, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!"

As Jesus walked alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, because they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," he said, "and I'll show you how to fish for people." Right away, they left their nets and followed him. Continuing on, he saw another set of brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with Zebedee their father repairing their nets. Jesus called them and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues. He announced the good news of the kingdom and healed every disease and sickness among the people.

Mt. 4:12-23 (C.E.B.)

I was listening to a radio program a couple of weeks ago.¹ I'm not sure I can remember enough of the program to tell you what it was about. I only know I was struck by an observation made about change, an observation that I've found myself pondering ever since.

It's become like a song that gets into your head and you can't get it out. Does that ever happen to you? At times, I'm not sure if it is God bringing it back to mind or if my subconscious wants to argue with the concept.

Let me share it with you and see what you think. They said that change happens in one of four seasons, for one of four reasons.

- We hurt enough that we have to change.
- We see enough that we are inspired to change.
- We learn enough that we want to change.
- We receive enough that we are able to change.

Let me repeat that, so you have time to wrap your mind around it. Change happens in one of four ways, for one of four reasons.

- We hurt enough that we have to change;
- We see enough that we are inspired to change;
- We learn enough that we want to change; or
- We receive enough that we are able to change.

I've realized, as I pondered it, that some people become migrants, for example, because it is too painful to remain behind. Others leave their home because they see a future filled with purpose. Still others are given the gift of an opportunity and they respond by leaving good things in order to receive better things.

So, maybe it's a good way to think about what makes it possible for people to change.

¹ Mputubwele

In our text today, Jesus calls *us* to change – or maybe he demands change. What is curious about his call is that he uses the exact same words John the Baptist had preached before he was arrested.

It is word for word the same sermon! In chapter three, John says, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” (Mt. 3:2). In the next chapter we hear Jesus say, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” (Mt. 4:17).

Now, last week I mentioned that when I’m writing sermons, I have been starting with ones I used before. I figure, if Jesus can start his sermons with the words of John the Baptist, it’s OK for me to start with my own words. 😊

Sometimes I make minor changes; sometimes the changes are significant. (And in case you’re wondering, today’s is very different.) But even when I use the same words, the context is different.

Which makes me wonder what context is different for Jesus. I mean, the obvious difference is the geographical setting. John preached in the wilderness, while Jesus preached in Galilee.

The desert is a place of symbolic trials and temptations. The people of Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness before entering the promised land. During that time, they learned obedience and trust. In the wilderness, they were learning who they were and whose they were. From the wilderness, John was calling them to remember their story. He was calling them to turn back to the God who brought them to this place.

In that context, John’s message is one of judgment and warning because they had forgotten the lessons of the wilderness. “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” (Mt. 3:2).

Jesus, on the other hand, preaches in the place he calls “home” (Mk. 2:1, 6:1). This is part of the promised land, the land of fulfillment. It’s where the people lived out their calling as God’s people. It’s also a region known for and by its association with a calling for Israel to be a light to the Gentiles (Is. 9:1; 42:6; 49:6).

In this context, Jesus offers an invitation to look around and respond to what God is doing. “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” (Mt. 4:17).

So, what is God doing that warrants a change?

And if it’s true that change happens in one of four ways, for one of four reasons – remember what I’ve been pondering for several weeks?

- We hurt enough that we have to change, or
- we see enough that we are inspired to change, or
- we learn enough that we want to change, or
- we receive enough that we are able to change.

If that’s true, what is different now that allows change to happen?

The most notable change that Matthew identifies is John’s arrest (Mt. 4:12). John is no longer able to preach, so Jesus steps into the vacancy (Mt. 4:17). Maybe Jesus hurts enough that he knows he has to change. He can no longer stand on the sidelines, even if he uses the same words.

Of course, maybe that’s what I think because it explains how change happened in my life. There was enough hurt in my life that I knew I needed to change, opening the door to leaving retirement to work with you.

Next week, I will not be here, but you will gather for your annual meeting. It is an invitation to change directions, to start something new, to carry on the work of the church in a new year with a new focus. We are not only entering a new season of preparing for a new pastor, we are also emerging from the pandemic. Both events are invitations to change. I don't know what the impetus for your change will be. It may be that you are hurting enough that you know you have to change; or it may be that you saw enough or learned enough or received enough that you are ready to change.

What I do know is that with almost every change we make, we have to set one thing down before we can pick up something else.

It reminds me of a scene from Sesame Street that Melissa used to love. Let's watch.

Video Clip:

This clip has Ernie wanting to play his saxophone with the band, but he can't because he is holding onto his rubber duckie. The song tells him to "put the duckie down." But it isn't until Ernie realizes he can pick it up after he is finished that he puts it down.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acBixR_JRuM

I love that video. I love the music. I love the way a variety of voices are employed to tell us how important it is to set things down if we want to try something new. I think it's a great way to prepare for an annual meeting, to think about things that we need to leave behind as we walk into the future God has in store for us.

At the same time, I wasn't sure I wanted to share it. I was reluctant because of the last thing Ernie is told before he sets the duckie down. He is told he can pick it up again when he's done. The implication is that we can return to our previous normal when we are finished.

And while that may be true when we say "yes" to a discernment and agree to serve for a two year term, in many cases it isn't true. None of the disciples are able to return to fishing after they leave their nets behind, for instance. They tried, but it didn't work (Jn. 21:1-19). Once we make a change, we are changed. There is no going back.

When the work of the annual meeting is over, after we have approved our budget and elected new people to serve, there is no turning back. We are making a decision to change, a decision to move in a new direction. We put the duckie down and we leave it there.

I don't know how many of you remember the movie version of the musical, *Godspell*. In the opening scenes, people are stuck in traffic or arguing with customers or caught in dead-end jobs when they hear the clarion call. One man is collecting money from people parking their cars. They are all living dead-end, meaningless lives.

They hear the clarion call of Jesus. "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!" (Mt. 4:17).

And one by one, each of them walks away from it all, choosing to follow Jesus. In many ways, it's not very surprising that they put down their duckies and join a rag-tag, non-violent rebel group. After all, they didn't have much to lose.

They changed because they were hurting. Or maybe they saw something that gave them hope.

In a similar way, we shouldn't find it very amazing that first Peter then Andrew set aside everything to follow Jesus. And maybe it isn't such a miracle that James and John leave their father holding the net. After all, they live in a world of oppression. There is very little hope for improvement. A foreign power rules through the agency of a local governor who works with the religious leaders to ensure *they* stay in power while the people are left out.

I suspect many people had given up on God and assumed God had given up on them. So, the disciples figure, why not leave it all and try something different? Why not put the duckie down?

“Change your hearts and lives!” Jesus says. “Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” (Mt. 4:17). And they change. The disciples leave everything behind.

He is still calling us to leave things behind, to set our duckies down. We have to leave something behind in order to experience the kingdom of heaven. You have to put the duckie down in order to play the saxophone.

I don't know what your particular “duckie” looks like. It could be a particular thing or a particular relationship or even a particular dream. It could be an angry temper or a story of hurt. It might be an old wound that keeps you wound up. Whatever it is, there are times when we need to put it down and leave it behind.

I don't say it is easy. Change is never easy. As some have said, the only people who like change are babies in a dirty diaper.

But what if we have received so much that we are able to change? What if we have learned so much that we want to change? What if we look back on the past eight years of Dave's leadership and glean the things we have learned as an invitation to move into the future with a sense of energy and excitement, as a gift that opens the door to change?

I don't know what the focus of Dave's ministry was or how he helped shape you. I wasn't here for that.

I do know we are at a point in time where change is going to happen. I'm encouraging you to embrace it and to welcome it. Because I believe God has something in store for you – and for me.

As Jesus says, “Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” (Mt. 4:17).

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Benediction

I will pick up a glass of water that is half full and show it to the congregation.

You may be thinking I'm inviting you to consider whether you are optimistic and see this as half full or pessimistic and see it as half empty. Instead, I want to ask you how heavy it is? And the answer to that really depends upon how long I hold it. It isn't heavy now, but if I keep holding it, it will become an increasingly heavy burden.

Some of us are carrying things we need to set down. Some of us are holding onto anger. Some of us are holding onto grudges. Some of us are holding onto traditions. Some of us are holding onto unrealistic hopes and dreams.

Like Elmo, we need to set the duckie down.

I will set the glass down.

Go. Be free. Enter into the world God has in store for you.
And be blessed. Amen.

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