

PACKING FOR TRANSFORMATION

Sermon preached by The Rev. Barbara E. Davis

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Scripture: Mark 10:17-31; Acts 9:1-20

Last week I received an email from a friend of mine whose life had undergone a major change over the summer. My friend's partner left her job in July and began living full time and volunteering on an organic farm in upstate New York run by the Sisters of the Community of the Holy Spirit, an Episcopal Order. While her partner is living on the farm, my friend is staying in the city during the week and commutes to the farm on the weekends. Her email arrived with the subject line: "a blog post of sorts." It began:

It's pretty in the morning, leaving Brewster on the 8:17am train.

Trees have been changing colors up here for a few weeks - today I contemplate more of the golden dried wrinkles on the ground. A season change. So apparent here, compared to the city. There it's the sky and cool air that tell me changes are underway. Yet here there's more evidence.

And what of my own changes? How aware am I of this next unfolding season? Does my internal time mirror the external world, or am I still in last winter's hibernation, or spring's awakening, or summer's productivity?

Those are big questions about transformation and change. Our awareness of the seasonal changes can provide a good opportunity to explore our own transformations. Being aware of what transformations we are in and what tools we may need to initiate the change are important elements to identify in any transition. Fall is a season when we feel change dramatically. Perhaps it is the colder temperatures or the new school routine, whatever it is, it is hard not to feel like the ground is shifting under our feet.

I was discussing the challenges of keeping our balance in the midst of these changes with another parent here at the church earlier this week. After considering if our difficulties adjusting might simply be attributed to Monday morning, the alignment of the planets, or the full moon, she said to me, "I have a friend who keeps reminding me that it can all change on a dime." In the unpredictable world of living with a toddler, this idea is a source of great hope. It is not just toddlers whose ups and downs are so pronounced; sometimes our transformations can twist adults all kinds of sideways before spinning us around on that dime.

The stories from the Bible which we heard today are about people entering into transformations, willingly or not. Let's first consider the rich man in the passage Denise read to us from the gospel of Mark. This man comes to Jesus as he is preparing to leave on a journey. He is a seeker who has come to Jesus in anticipation. He is hoping to find the solution to the last piece of the puzzle he has been trying to solve. Although he has been following the commandments as Jesus outlines, he is missing something still. He is packed, but with that nagging feeling that something is forgotten... Jesus gives him very specific instructions, but these are transformations he cannot acclimate to in that moment. The writer of Mark's gospel leaves the man grieving and shocked after his conversation with Jesus. Despite his anticipation, despite

the ways he had prepared, he is the most unlikely person of all to be able to step fully into the transformation he so longed for. Yet we know only that moment, and nothing of how this encounter shaped the rest of his journey.

The story of the conversion of Saul (soon to be Paul) in Acts appears to describe the opposite experience from the rich man in the gospel of Mark. Saul has set out on a different mission, he expects no transformation. He is woefully unprepared for what he encounters. Although he enters this transformation with no anticipation, like the rich man, he is the least likely person to be able to engage and embrace the transition he finds himself in.

But while Saul's transformation was dramatic, and in many ways complete, it is also clear that he did not understand every aspect of this transformation when the scales fell off of his eyes. In many ways, Saul's conversion on the Damascus road was just a beginning; in fact, even in Acts his name change is a slow transition, he is referred even in later chapters as "Saul, also known as Paul." (Acts 13:9) Paul's transformation happens over time, and we should carry that awareness to Paul's writings to the communities throughout Asia Minor. His letters give us a wealth of information about the struggles and questions he was wrestling with in his transformation.

Paul is typically someone Christians have one of two reactions to: love or hate. His words are quoted both to inspire and sustain faith and to tear down spirits and separate people from communities which should embrace them. The late New Testament scholar Robin Scroggs says that "The trouble with Paul is that he has too many friends and too many enemies. The one thing that friends and enemies tend to have in common is they do not really know what Paul is all about."¹ With the goal of learning more of what Paul was all about, our weekly Sunday morning bible study is devoting this whole year to Paul's life and writings. We have begun a journey that is a close examination of the tools he used in his own transformation. We are packing his letters, a few maps, and a few extra suitcases for questions.

I must confess that I do not consider myself a "fan" of Paul. It is not just because of words attributed to him about women's inability to lead in church and his ethical codes that are repeated constantly to condemn homosexuality, or his convoluted arguments that do more to confuse than clarify. A big part of my disinterest in him is that his conversion in Acts 9 is so hard to relate to. I remember learning about this story in Sunday school and being amazed by it and captivated by the details, - what did the scales look like? Could he not see at all? - but his transformation was so extraordinary, I felt left out. I longed for such rapid transformation in my own life but was left with the mundane, ordinary, daily struggles. It was a misconception about the nature of transformation that could have been simply corrected, but the congregation I was growing up in longed as well for something extraordinary and sudden to happen in the lives of its worshippers.

Interestingly, it is not from Paul's own hand that we hear this story of his conversion, but from the writer of Acts, a writer who most likely also wrote the gospel of Luke. In Acts Paul's conversion is included within a narrative that tells much about the leaders of the fledgling Jesus movement and how their personalities created and clashed.

As I was preparing for this year long study of Paul, my view of him transformed slightly when I began to think about Paul as a writer. Granted his writing was not intentional in the way we might think of writers of great fiction, for his letters were communication set in a particular context, dealing with a certain range of problems, possibilities, and priorities.

Perhaps it was Paul's travels in Asia Minor that led me to it, but I recently found myself drawn to the writings of Orhan Pamuk, the novelist and Nobel Prize winner in literature from Turkey. In his Nobel lecture titled "My Father's Suitcase" he tells the story of his father giving him a small suitcase filled with his father's writings. Orhan Pamuk was already an established writer, something his father had always strove for but never accomplished. It seemed in giving his son this suitcase he was asking to be remembered in a particular way. It was an overwhelming gift from this father to his son. Mr. Pamuk describes how the suitcase sat unopened for many days and through his description of how he viewed that unopened suitcase and its contents, he unfolds a marvelous tapestry about writing and the writer's mind. Allow me to share a few short sections of his explorations:

The writer's secret is not inspiration – for it is never clear where it comes from – it is his stubbornness, his patience. That lovely Turkish saying – to dig a well with a needle – seems to me to have been said with writers in mind...

A writer talks of things that everyone knows but does not know they know. To explore this knowledge, and to watch it grow, is a pleasurable thing; the reader is visiting a world at once familiar and miraculous. When a writer shuts himself up in a room for years on end to hone his craft – to create a world – if he uses his secret wounds as his starting point, he is, whether he knows it or not, putting a great faith in humanity. My confidence comes from the belief that all human beings resemble each other; that others carry wounds like mine – that they will therefore understand. All true literature rises from this childish, hopeful certainty that all people resemble each other.²

What Orhan Pamuk is describing about being a writer, Paul certainly would embrace. Paul the writer is full of that hopeful certainty that all people resemble each other, and he is continually trying to draw out those things that everyone knows but does not know they know.

Paul occasionally does a very poor job of writing. He digresses. He writes sentences that are too long. He uses metaphors that are not complete. His anger flashes front and center. Paul occasionally does an amazing job writing. He constructs sentences that are so inspiring, he imagines metaphors so full of meaning beyond the mere words on the page, they have been incorporated and used in our Christian liturgies for thousands of years. When we hear those words, we truly can believe he possessed the heart of a writer. Most writers will tell you that in the process of putting words on the page they hope to inspire and transform the lives of others, but a transformation also happens within them. This transformation is certainly true of Paul in his writings.

In his commentary on Acts, William Willimon talks about Paul's transformation on the Damascus road, reminding readers that "conversions" like the one Paul experienced are common in Luke and Acts. In fact, these two books are quite intentional about highlighting

transformations. As Willimon puts it, “the Christian life is akin to the way in which Luke organizes the life of Paul – a series of journeys, pilgrimages, excursions out to some unexplored territory where all that is known in the faithfulness of God. Conversion is a process more than a moment.”³

We are followers of this tradition. We recognize that our transformations are not just moments but a process, which makes it more difficult to be completely prepared. What do you pack for a process? Patience. Confidence in God’s faithful presence. Time for the unexpected. Whether our preparation for the transformation is like the rich man seeking answers in anticipation or like Paul set in our ways with a certain unwavering agenda completely unaware of the change we are about to encounter, transformation is our constant companion in the journey of faith. Knowing that connection does not mean we are always articulate about these changes or that we always embrace these transformations immediately. In fact, these changes sometimes cause us to feel terribly uncomfortable and even to say things we don’t mean and act in ways we don’t particularly like. But these moments are just as much a part of our transformations as the creative and energetic moments. The tone of our transformations can, after all, change on a dime, but both sides of the coin are part of our process of change.

I had thought initially that I would end this sermon quoting the end of one of Paul’s letters, but somehow, since I started with my friend’s email “blog,” it seems more appropriate to end where we began. Here is the paragraph which she ended the email, after reflecting on the commonalities between life on the farm and in the city and the community of commuters she concludes:

What, in the end, makes something succeed, and something else fail? And do things ever really fail? Or do they just get taken up in new forms and energies?

It is all connected.

We are all connected.

I’m on/in this spec of the web running from Brewster to Grand Central station at 8:17am.

Then, at 9:32 all these commuting creatures will flow out like bees from the hive to pollinate the Great Garden in which we live and move and have our being.

¹ Scroggs, Robin. *Paul for a New Day*. (Fortress Press; Minneapolis, MN: 1977), p. 1.

² Pamuk, Orhan. "My Father's Suitcase." Nobel Lecture, December 7, 2006. Found at http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2006/pamuk-lecture.html on October 1, 2009.

³ Willimon, William H. *Acts*. In *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (John Knox Press; Atlanta, GA: 1988), p. 103.