

Where I am going you cannot follow Fifth sermon in series entitled: Transitions

Preached Sunday, May 4, 2008
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Text: Deut. 31:1-8 and John 14:25-31

Theme: The series is over and we have done some hard work together in looking at the change that is coming to our church with me leaving – now let us look below the change at those deep fears, doubts, insecurities, and desires. Where is God in this part of the journey?

There is this humorous story that I have had in my files for years and I loved it but could never find a sermon where it was appropriate to tell it. But since I am running out of opportunities to tell the story and because today's scripture readings were about mysterious words spoken in times of transition I thought I could tell this true story about some mysterious words spoken by astronaut Neil Armstrong when he walked on the moon.

We all remember his famous quote as he stepped onto the moon, "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," but it was followed by several remarks of regular communication between the astronaut and mission control. Just before re-entering the lunar lander Armstrong made this enigmatic remark, "Good luck, Mr. Gorsky." Most people in NASA thought it was a casual remark about some rival Soviet cosmonaut but after checking the Russian and American space personnel there was no Mr. Gorsky. Over the years several journalists asked Armstrong what that remark meant and he would always just smile.

Finally 26 years later, when Armstrong was making a speech, a reporter once again asked him to explain that statement. This time he responded by saying that Mr. Gorsky had died recently so it would be okay to tell the story. When he had been a young kid, he was playing baseball with a friend in his backyard. His friend hit a fly ball, which landed in front of his neighbor's bedroom windows. His neighbors were Mr. and Mrs. Gorsky. As he leaned down to pick up the ball, young Armstrong heard Mrs. Gorsky say, "Love! You want love?! You'll get love when the kid next door walks on the moon!"

Years later from the heavens Armstrong sends a message, "Good luck, Mr. Gorsky." In a strange way it reminds me of the message that Jesus is sending to the disciples he is going to leave behind. "You want peace, you want direction, you want security? Well I am sending you the Holy Spirit."

Let me tell you two stories that are a little tamer. The first is from the distant pages of the Old Testament. The Israelites' wilderness journey is coming to an end. They have wandered for nearly forty years following their beloved leader Moses. With the help of God, he has brought them out of Egypt, split the Red Sea and destroyed the Pharaoh's army, provided direction, food, water, and built a nation out of slaves. For forty years the Israelites have dreamed of the moment when they would walk behind their leader into the Promised Land. But then Moses stands in front of his people and says, "I am now a hundred and twenty years old and I can't get around like I used to. The Lord has told me that I shall not cross the Jordan. You can cross, Joshua can cross, but I cannot go."

If you were one of the Israelites how would you be feeling? Abandoned? Misled? Fearful?

Let me tell you another story of similar circumstances but separated by many generations. Jesus has been traveling with his disciples for nearly three years and has been talking about establishing a kingdom. They think that it is going to be made of earthly brick and mortar and that he will lead the triumphant revolution and that they will follow and receive positions of power and honor in his new court. But things start to change during that third visit to Jerusalem. He starts to talk about being arrested, beaten, and crucified.

He gathers his closest companions and basically announces, “I am going away and where I am going you cannot follow me – at least for now.” Can you imagine the shock? His disciples were probably saying to each other this was the man who was supposed to lead us, train us, and show us the way to the kingdom he talked so much about. We depend on him. Our faith depends on him. Our vision for the future depends on him. Can you imagine their feelings?

I asked that same question during one of my Disciple classes just after the word came of my new appointment and the response was immediate. “Yes we can imagine! The disciples’ feelings are our feelings. With you leaving we are concerned, frustrated, angry, and fearful.”

This morning I would like to discuss those deep feelings as we bring this sermon series on Transitions to a close. If you remember in the third sermon on “Wilderness Wanderings” I talked about taking time to look beneath the exterior change to really examine the inner and deeper fears, doubts, insecurities, and desires. Too often in times of transition the focus stays on the obvious and physical change and we don’t take time to look deeper.

When someone close to us dies, we spend so much of our time and resources focused on the details of the funeral, on making sure the obituary is exactly right, on making sure all the family is notified, and on caring for the estate that we don’t often take the time to care about ourselves. We don’t spend time in the wilderness asking the hard questions about what lies beneath the surface.

When we move we are consumed by tasks like buying a new house, arranging trucks and movers, packing, closing down accounts in one place and opening them in another, and the list goes on and on. Often we get so consumed in the physical events of change that we don’t pause to reflect on those things that are changing deep within us.

When we have a new baby, buy a new house, change careers, retire, or have a change in health too often the tangibles command our attention and don’t spend the necessary healing, renewing, and discerning time dealing with our inner losses. So this morning I would like to look specifically at the change that is taking place in our church with Carol and me moving and to look beneath the obvious and spend some time dealing with our fears, doubts, insecurities, and desires. I will start by sharing some of my own reflections and then turn to you to share your ideas.

I confess that the early moments of my meditations were consumed by formulating lists of tasks that needed to be completed. Slowly tasks gave way to feelings and day after day I discovered something about the move that caught me by surprise. For instance one of the first feelings that I had to deal with was remorse. How could I have said yes to moving from a church that ran so perfectly, that had so much vision and harmony, that held so many talented and generous people, that had great music and great staff? When I explored those feelings and didn’t try to subconsciously correct them I discovered I was dealing with a fear of the future and perhaps a trust issue with God.

In another meditation I dealt with my feelings of jealousy. I found myself remembering all the work that I had done and all the wilderness moments and realizing that here we were on the doorstep of the Promised Land and I was not going to be the one leading the way. There was going to be another Joshua. I felt jealously, pride, and the need to be in control raising their ugly heads.

Then I dealt with my fear of failure. I started playing the “what if” game. What if Rody comes in and says that all the priorities that I have set are not legitimate? What if he discovers that I ignored the Discipline in the creation of the Leadership Team? What if I didn’t teach the right way or didn’t grow the church in the right direction? What if he preaches better than I did? What if he grows the church bigger than I did? What if under his leadership they do things that I was never able to do?

Finally I dealt with the hardest feeling of all. What if my congregation likes Rody more than they like me? I had finally scratched at one of the deepest issues of change and loss. It was the issue of self worth and peer group acceptance.

I believe every pastor deals with these issues whether they ever admit it or not. We all wrestle with these feelings and it is a wonder that more of us are not more dysfunctional. But I will admit that I actually had a good time in my wilderness wrestling because as I dealt with my issues of self worth, control, pride, fear of failure, and jealousy I realized were issues that I have been dealing with all my life and that I need to work on no matter where I serve. In my wilderness I started healing from my loss and was actually able to celebrate in your new future.

I celebrate the fact that this church is in a beautiful place where you get to hear the gospel message proclaimed in an exciting new way with a new voice and a new heart. You have heard me for seven years and you know my perspective. Now you get to hear another perspective and you will be blessed. I got a chance to watch Rody this past week on a DVD presentation about worship. I was impressed by his passion, the depth of his background, and commitment to excellence and I believe with all my heart that he will bring the gospel message to life in a way that will build upon what I and all the pastors before me have already started.

I celebrate the fact that you are in a place where you are not afraid to take risks and try new things. When I came to Aldersgate I brought new ideas and we tried new things like reaching out to White Swan and to the entire Conference in a huge bike trip. Rody will bring new ideas and the church is strong enough in their faith that you will be willing to risk.

I celebrate that you are in a place where your faith will grow more than if I were to stay. When I think about the two stories of this morning and what would have happened if Moses or Jesus were to have stayed. Faith would have been stifled. The leaders would have relied on their leaders and not on developing their own faith. Many of you here might feel that you have grown spiritually because of my leadership. Now it is time to understand that your faith is yours and not dependent on me. This transition will give you a chance to flex your spiritual muscle.

These are some of my discoveries that have come through my meditations and reflections. Now I would like to turn the tables and ask you to look beneath the obvious changes and scratch at your fears, doubts, insecurities, and desires. Take a moment right now and turn to someone to your right or to your left and share one fear, or one desire, or one doubt that just doesn't seem to go away. I will give you a few minutes to talk and then I will ask for a couple people to share.

LET THE CONGREGATION TALK AND WHEN IT SEEMS THEY HAVE HAD ENOUGH TIME BRING IT BACK FOR SHARING. REFLECT UPON THE ISSUES RAISED.

Thank you for sharing and being so honest. I realize in any time of transition there is a great deal of fear and trembling. In fact if you go back to the two readings from today, one of the things that is consistent in both is the repeated instruction, "Do not be afraid." Twice Moses tells the Israelites, "Be strong and bold... God will be with you and will not fail or forsake you." Our Lord said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

I would offer the same words as we leave this series on transitions. Whatever the change may be, whatever loss may come, whatever new direction you may be led in life, and whatever new companion God gives you for the journey... do not be afraid. God is with you. So in the words of Jesus, "Rise, let us be on our way."