

Navigating the Changes

Series: Discipleship with Integrity; Acts 1: 1-11

“Dear Theophilus, in the first volume of this book I wrote on everything that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he said good-bye to the apostles.” That’s how the author of the *Gospel of Luke* begins his sequel that we now call *The Acts of the Apostles*. Both volumes were addressed to Theophilus, probably a symbolic name meaning “lover of God”.

This second volume begins with an expanded story about Jesus’ departure called his *ascension*. According to Acts, Jesus revealed himself alive after the crucifixion and stayed with his disciples in Jerusalem for forty days after that. On this fateful day, they are together. “Is now the time to restore David’s kingdom to Israel?” Will this be the big payoff?

The Message translation gives Jesus a great line here: “You don’t get to know the time.... What you’ll get is the Holy Spirit”! He tells them to stay here in Jerusalem and wait. “The Holy Spirit will come to you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem (where they were), in Judea and Samaria (surrounding territories of both friendly and unfriendly people), and to the ends of world (meaning Rome).

The focus will not be to restore Israel, but to spread the vision of unlimited and divine love you have seen in Jesus to the entire world. This becomes the outline for the entire book of Acts: the renewal of Israel’s original mission, now given to the followers of Jesus, to be a blessing to all nations. Then, something very unusual happened.

Jesus disappeared in a cloud. Where have we seen clouds before in the Bible? Isn’t it a familiar image? Moses was hidden by a cloud while he met with God on Mt. Sinai to receive the ten commandments. The tent of meeting was surrounded and obscured whenever Moses entered to meet with God. Jesus, on the mountain of transfiguration, was surrounded by a cloud representing the image of the glory of God. Here in the Acts passage, Jesus is again hidden by a cloud. Jesus, as they have known him, has been absorbed into, and obscured by, the reality of God.

We are left with this great image of the disciples staring into an empty sky, looking for something no longer there. Suddenly, as though from thin air, two men in white robes are standing there. Most of the time, two men in white robes means *God is calling*. “Why are you standing there staring at an empty sky?” They seem incredulous. “Jesus is not gone for good, though you guys certainly won’t understand how or why he’ll come back”. Things have changed!

Things definitely had changed for Jesus. The life of the Jesus of history was now over. There is a clear demarcation of the pre-Easter Jesus -- whose face continues to be sought through our modern-day quests for his historic reality. This person was no longer in the picture

Things had really changed for the disciples. They thought they’d lost Jesus at the crucifixion, when he died. Then, they seemed to get him back, at least in some sense, for forty mystical days. Now, he is gone. There is a finality about this departure and the disciples feel pretty much alone. That familiar presence that taught and helped them understand, is no longer operational. Everything has changed

Change is the theme for today. How do we navigate life’s changes? This is the really important message for us from this passage. In fact, this is the really important message for us from the entire book of Acts.

Change is an inevitable part of life. The same is true for the life of faith. We can learn from the disciples by observing how they navigated the change from Jesus' physical presence to Jesus' abiding presence through the Holy Spirit.

Let me ask you a couple of questions: do you enjoy changes in your life? Do you change the furniture in your living room or bedroom at least once a year or are you a person who never changes the arrangement? Do you repaint more often than once per decade? Do you find you move fairly often, and not because you have to?

What kinds of changes do you find pleasant? What kinds are unpleasant? How do you handle these change? Are they stressful? Are they exhilarating?

I'm going to suggest something you may not like, though it may be true anyway. The suggestions is that our attitudes toward change, whether for it or against it, tend to be just two sides of the same coin, two ends of the same continuum. All of us tend to use either frequent change or the refusal to change to avoid significant life changes. Our attitudes toward change, whether changing a lot or never changing, serve to shield us from the realization that we need to make significant life changes in order to grow spiritually and to grow up in our faith.

The bottom line is that people tend to make those really big, life-altering, changes when there is no other choice. We make those growth-producing life changes when forced to by life's circumstances, such as when we experience death, change in employment, change in our primary relationships. Sometimes, we don't change even then!

What big life changes have occurred for you over the past few years? What caused the changes? How did you respond? What has been the result? What results do you expect to see in the future?

The biggest life change this community of faith, Crossroads Church, has experienced recently has been buying this building and moving into this neighborhood. What caused this change? How did we respond? What has been the result? What results do you expect to see in the future?

This *change* thing seems to be extremely important in the scheme of life. How we change affects the quality of our lives. How we use opportunities for change has a great impact on our ability to live faithful and fruitful lives.

Navigating the changes is the last theme in this sermon series *Discipleship with Integrity*. In terms of our life journey, let me define exactly what I mean by significant change. In our lives of faith, there are two types of change characterized by two costly journeys. You and I must take these two costly journeys in order to experience that quality of life Jesus described in the gospel as *abundant life*. We must experience these significant changes to discover life that is characterized by faithfulness and fruitfulness. This is the quality of life represented by the word "disciple".

The first of these two journeys moves toward discerning God's call for your life, discovering what your ultimate life calling is. We are assured that, when we find our life's call, we will experience feelings of grace, privilege, and gratitude. There will be the feeling that this is what you were born to. Discovering this call, however, involves stepping out and taking a chance. Also, be assured that your life's calling has nothing to do with success or achievement. (inspired by Francis Dewar). It is all about loving what you do. It is about doing what you uniquely are meant to do. Poet W. H. Auden expresses it this way:

God may reduce you, on Judgment Day
to tears of shame, reciting by heart
the poems you would have written, had your life been good.

Discerning your call means to catch the vision of God's new heaven and new earth. It is to look upon this new creation and come to believe that your vocation is to help in its creation. (inspired by Elizabeth O'Connor). It means to trust that we are "not powerless in the oppressive situations in which we feel caught. We can make the new." (Elizabeth O'Connor) Your call is all about what the Spirit is nudging you to do.

The second journey moves toward responding to that clear call by giving ourselves to act on that call. It, too, is a costly journey. It is a narrow gate of entry. It is a hard road and few find it. This is the journey of getting into action and living out your call. As you begin to live out your call, it will lead you to do something new. The changes you will make will be intentional and will lead to life.

While you should always weigh the risks involved, don't limit your vision. (inspired by Elizabeth O'Connor) Don't play it safe. Fear is inevitable on this journey, but so is excitement. Be encouraged by the words of former UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold:

I am being driven forward
into an unknown land.
The pass grows steeper,
The air colder and sharper,
A wind from my unknown goal
Stirs the strings

Of expectation. (*Markings*)

Finally, author Elizabeth O'Connor, when asked to define the word *artist* writes: an artist is, "the one who dares to act on the bold belief that he (she) has a word to speak that would be healing if it could be heard." You and I are called to be artists. God invites us to discern our unique call and to act on that call so that our lives can be good, abundant, faithful, and fruitful.

O God our dance,
in whom we live
and move
and have our being;
so direct our strength
and inspire our weakness
that we may enter with power
into the movement
of your whole creation,
through our partner Jesus Christ, Amen.
(Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*)