

**Change Happens**

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Mark 9:2-9

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We need change, all kinds of change, but we don't like change, it makes us uncomfortable. It is a strange dilemma we are in.

I remember a former appointment when we had to replace the sanctuary carpet. I knew we were in for a skirmish at least and possibly a war. We had to have new carpet. The side aisles were separating from their backing and becoming increasingly dangerous as they slid and bunched. And the front of the sanctuary had several large and growing tears that were not only unattractive but capable of catching heels and tripping folks.

But there was no way to gently change the carpet. We have people who want all kinds of colors and all kinds of different shades of the same color. There is no way to please everyone, maybe not even most everyone. So there you have it, in a nutshell, we often need change and yet we dislike and resist the conflict it brings.

Today's scripture is about change and hits this same point. The disciples have come to know Jesus just as he is and they like him that way. He teaches forgiveness and practices healing. There is in him and about him the promise of the kingdom of heaven right here and right now. All this they like.

But then one day Jesus takes three of them, Peter, James and John, up a mountain, above where life is usual and predictable, and there God makes a great change in Jesus. The change can be seen in how he shines so that even his garments glow white. And the change can be seen in his speaking with Moses and Elijah, who if not dead, then went to heaven alive long, long ago. And when God speaks from the cloud, "This is my son, listen to him," suddenly their whole view of God, Moses, and Elijah shifts dramatically.

In a lame attempt to avoid the change God has made, Peter, James, and John offer to build some tents that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah might stay there on the mountain top, might just stay in this moment, just stay the way things are. But Jesus will have nothing of it and he leads them down the mountain, toward Jerusalem, to his arrest, humiliation, torture, and death. Big changes are happening.

The change wrought in Jesus and for the disciples is the change necessary to save the world, necessary for pure love to confront pure evil and win; a win not only for God, but a win for us. It's the change we need, but it is also the change that will bring conflict and the disciples, like us, fear conflict and in their fear resist. Still today there are those who would have Christianity without crucifixion, which is of course, an

impossible resistance to the change God has chosen.

I am going to pick on alcoholics because I know from the inside how the transformation of salvation works for folks like me. But you can substitute whatever change is needed in your life, and which in fear you resist. It might be overeating, anger, lust, worry, greed, or even war. It only needs to be that with which you struggle for control of your life.

You may have trouble coming up with a name for what ails you. Alcoholics have a terrible time admitting they are alcoholics. Denial is a major part of the disease. I have known drunks with all kinds of family and legal trouble, trouble at work, and with friends, who claim they don't have a problem with drinking. They blame the cop who stopped them, or their wife, or their boss, or their children, but not themselves.

What alcoholics know is that if we admit we have a problem, then we are admitting that we must stop drinking, that who we are and how we live our lives must change. To admit that what we hoped was our medicine is actually our disease is a hard first step to recover from. Hopefully, eventually, the alcoholic becomes "sick and tired of being sick and tired," acknowledges the disease, and tries to stop drinking. But it rarely works. The disease resists the strongest of wills. No matter how much we alcoholics want to be sober, we drink anyway. So the second step of recovery is to admit our powerlessness over alcohol. In AA, we say it this way: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol-that our lives had become unmanageable."<sup>1</sup>

It is no different for Peter, James, and John. They and all the disciples and followers of Jesus know that though they want so much to be compassion as Jesus is compassion, and to love and serve God as Jesus does, they fail. They fail not just once, but again, and again, and again. They argue over who is greatest, and over the money, and over feeding the hungry, and over almost anything anybody else argues over.

And the disciples know that they are not alone in this failure to goodness. Their world is a hard place where folks of great wealth use and abuse the poor; where folks of great power and mighty armies impose their will on smaller and weaker nations; where families scar their babies and diseases ravage the loving. The disciples know by hard experience that they are powerless over their lives and their world, and that if managing goodness were left to them, it would be folly.

They hunger for the change, the transformation, promised in the teachings and acts of Jesus. By Jesus, they see the possibility that what they cannot do for themselves, Jesus, by

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<sup>1</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous, (Alcoholics Anonymous World Service Inc., New York, 1976), p. 59

the power of his holy father, can do in them and for the world. Or again, as AA says it, they follow Jesus because "(we) came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."<sup>2</sup>

What the alcoholic and all those who struggle against their own failings have come to know is that we cannot be our own savior, let alone the world's savior and there must be a power beyond us, bigger than us and bigger than the world, that not only can save us, but passionately longs to restore the sanity of all the crazy folk, even me, or else we are doomed. We must have a change that we cannot bring for ourselves.

And yet we fear it. Peter, James, and John get to see God's great power. They see it in Jesus' healings, they see it on the mountain when Jesus glows in glory and the Creator makes the dead consult with the living. And though they see the power greater than themselves, and though they hunger and thirst for its salvation, still they fear the change they need and they wish to go no further.

It is the going further that frightens them and me. When things get hard and I get afraid, I want control of my life. If I am going to fall into a pit of snakes, then I want to be in charge of the falling.

But I cannot completely control my life, nor can any of us. None of us can make ourselves or the world the way we want it to be. Our desire to be in charge of it all comes from our fears. And our fears come from not trusting God with our coming down the mountain and our journey to Jerusalem.

Jesus has told the disciples and they now know it to be true, that to follow him is to face not only his death, but to face their own deaths. They know it is not enough to believe that there is a power greater than themselves that can restore them to sanity, but that they must follow that power into the dark night of Gethsemane; that they will only barely be able to see Jesus ahead of them, and then, for awhile, they will see him no more, and must follow blindly on.

This is the third step toward salvation and AA says it this way: we "made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we *understood him*."<sup>3</sup> Trusting God with our lives more than we trust ourselves is the most difficult step to take toward salvation. It is a frightening thing to totally submit to the care of God because God has been known to send a murdering Moses back to Egypt to challenge Pharaoh; and God has been known to send a reluctant Elijah to heal the dying and feed the hunger in a foreign and harsh land; and to send frightened

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

lives down from the mountain of glory to Jerusalem to die.

God has called us, this congregation, and in fact every congregation, to face our fear of the change necessary to our salvation. For unless we "turn our will and our lives over to the will of God," then the world will stay its same miserable and sinful self. If we and the world are to be saved from our insanity, then we, too, must pray a deciding prayer (and if you are like me this is at least a daily prayer) which says something like, "Creator, I cannot manage my life. You can. Therefore I turn my will and my life over to your care."

Wednesday is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Lent is the Christian season in which we turn our thoughts and study toward Jesus' last days, toward his suffering, humiliation, and crucifixion. None of us wants to make this trip. All of us would rather simply build a tent and stay on top of the mountain. Each of us hopes to get through this part of the journey with minimal discomfort, minimal change, and maximum salvation.

I invite us in this Lent to let go fear of change and decide each Lenten morning to turn our will and life over to the care of God for this day, this hour, even this minute. I invite us this Lent to become observers of how God cares for us, to let God be God of our lives.

Shalom and amen.