

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

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The Changes We Make

When I was twelve my two older brothers decided to teach me to swim. They had their own special way of doing things and when it came to my swimming lessons I found myself hanging between the two of them; one had my arms and the other my legs. As I went flying through the air and into the deep end of the pool I could still hear them yelling over my screams; “hold your breath and you’ll float to the surface.” To my amazement it worked; I struggled to stay afloat but eventually my panic subsided and I was swimming.

You might think that my brothers’ actions were cruel. But it was probably the only action they could take. They had tried for years to get me into the deep end of the pool but I kept refusing to go with them. They knew that I had the ability to swim but was too afraid to try. I was content to stay in the shallower water and not explore the remainder of the pool. I was afraid to leave my safety zone.

I had grown so comfortable with what I was doing that the thought of change frightened me to no end. Even though I was envious of all my friends who could swim, I couldn’t make myself try the deep water. My fear was crippling. My brothers gave me a great gift that day; they were able to release me from that fear. They allowed me to get out of my comfort zone and expand the places I could go to swim. I no longer had to make excuses to my friends when they wanted to go swimming at their favorite spot on the old canal. Now, I would happily go along.

Fear of the unknown keeps us from venturing out and discovering what the world has to offer, what God has to offer. The Israelites would rather go back to slavery than follow Moses, to follow God, to their Promised Land. Life for the Israelites living under the Egyptian task master’s whip was oppressive. Punishment for not obeying could be up to 100 lashes and they knew just how much punishment to dole out so you would be able to go back to work. After a while we can grow accustomed to any situation, even one of slavery. The Israelites had done just that, they had grown accustomed to it. They didn’t know what freedom really meant even though they had been praying for it for hundreds of years. Their fear was stronger than their need to leave their oppressed life. “For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” (Exodus 14:12)

They wanted to change their lives, but when change came, they wanted to go back to the way they were. Change is frightening and usually when it comes, it’s not what we expected or sometimes even wanted. The Israelites didn’t know where they were going and what dangers they would find along the way. Instead of going forward they would rather go back to the way they were. Going back seemed the right thing to do. They had lost faith in their leader and they had lost faith in God. When this happens we remain stagnant. That’s when we have to work harder, search our inner being, muster our strength, and face forward and start our journey again. In the end, God’s persuasion wins out. Moses leads the people out of slavery; away from a life of oppression. He parts the waters of the Red Sea and takes them to safety. He leads them to freedom and new life.

Like Moses, we don't have to do it alone, Jesus is there and He has taught us the way. He continuously tells his disciples and us to go the extra distance. The young man, in the Gospel reading this morning, was doing all the right things. He was obeying the commandments, especially the ones Jesus listed. Then Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor, but he could not do it. He followed God's commandments but he wouldn't go the extra step. The step we all have to take when we take Jesus as our personal savior. Following God is not easy. He will ask us to go places where we normally wouldn't go and do things that we normally wouldn't do. The young man wasn't willing to give up his passions even with the promise of riches in heaven.

Change involves giving up some of what we have. For most of us that is difficult to do. We don't always see the great rewards that come when we do. I've made a lot of changes in my life, some were easy and some were difficult. The change that affected my life the most was coming back to church. I was happy where I was with my faith. I believed in God, would come to church on what I thought were the important days; Christmas, Easter, weddings and funerals. The rest of the time I believed that if God was everywhere then why did I have to come to church to be with him? He should be there with me at the fishing hole. Coming back to church turned out to be the most rewarding change I've ever made. It has given me a new lease on life. I'm more comfortable with myself. I have a better relationship with my family; a relationship that was on the rocks. And I have a renewed faith in God, a faith I had been searching for, for almost ten years. Before I knew God existed. Now I have a personal relationship with God. He's not just in my mind but He's in my heart as well.

My spiritual growth has come a long way from that day years ago. I've had to make a lot of changes and have had to get out of my comfort zone many times: Leading Youth Group, attending Princeton Youth Forum, Knox College Lay Ministry, Canada Youth, and Bible Study to name a few. All these changes have brought me here today. But lately, I feel like I am at a standstill. Since I've resigned from Christian Education, I have been unsure what my role at the church should be. I have been asking God for over a year now to show me the way. I hope and listen for the answer to no avail. Either God is not ready to answer me or more likely, I have not heard His answer. I'm not sure what He has in store for me but I know two things to be true. I'm no longer afraid of the changes that will occur in my future. And I know that in time and with a lot more prayer He will show me my new path. Of this I'm sure.

Change comes to all of us. A change was about to happen to Joshua as well. Moses had died and Joshua was charged with the daunting task of leading the Israelites into the Promised Land. This challenge included claiming the land from the current inhabitants, fighting battles, and providing spiritual leadership for the entire nation. Understandably, Joshua may have felt the overwhelming weight of the task before him. And so the Lord offered these comforting yet encouraging words: be strong and courageous.

God told Joshua to "be strong and courageous" three times in the passage read this morning. "Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors"

"Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law"

“I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

We, like Joshua, may be asked to face overwhelming challenges in our lives. But as the scripture teaches, when we are strong and courageous and overcome fear, the Lord will be with us always.

In the King James Version, the Bible says “be strong and of good courage”. Being of good courage is slightly different than being courageous. The unabridged dictionary defines courage as “mental or moral strength enabling one to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty firmly and resolutely.” By this definition even a bank robber could be said to have courage. He is withstanding danger, fear and difficulty. Good courage, on the other hand, is the ability to act on one's beliefs despite danger or disapproval. Good courage is when we choose to make the right decision, especially when it is difficult. Good courage demands our respect when it incurs risk without selfish motivation. Good courage is moral strength in the face of danger. That is the courage God is asking of Joshua, of us.

Being courageous doesn't mean that you have to do something big. Being courageous doesn't mean you suddenly have to overcome all your fear at once, or do something that completely terrifies you. Courage is about taking the first step; doing something that makes you stretch and helps you grow in experience, in confidence, and in faith. What courageous steps are we taking? Perhaps it's forgiving that person who has hurt us? Perhaps it's talking to our neighbor about faith and God? Perhaps it's volunteering to teach Sunday School? Perhaps it's ... well the list is endless and God will show us the way.

So there Joshua stands on the edge of the water of the River Jordan between the wilderness where they came from and the land God has promised. The people of God need to cross over. Now he has to go to the Israelites, the people who have followed Moses out of slavery and through the wilderness, and tell them it is time to go, to move ahead, to take a bold step on their journey. He isn't sure if they will listen or not, if they will respect him or not, if they will receive him or not. So Joshua, who is convinced that God is with him, gathers up his confidence to tell the Israelites it is time to move. It is time to be move from the way things have always been to the way God is calling them to be. And, probably much to Joshua's relief, the people's response is one of trust and encouragement.

New St James is sitting on the edge of the river between where we have come from and where God is going to take us. We have come a long way, the things we have endured, and built, and done are amazing! But we are sometimes prone to grumbling and insecurity. We trust God, but we are uncertain and even fearful about the future and what unknown place God might be leading us. So, we are sometimes stubborn and set in our ways. We believe in God's promises, but sometimes God has pretty wild ideas that stretch us to think and act in ways we are not used to. After all, sometimes God's ideas are a little crazy. Who would've thought a boy raised in the Roman Catholic Church would be standing behind the pulpit of a Presbyterian church.

When it comes to church, we are especially hesitant to change. We want church to be what church has always been. We want tradition and familiar things. We want to tell the old, old story and sing the old, old songs. We want to hear it one more time and we want somebody to tell us we are safe and secure. But,

guess what? Change comes anyway. Things do change, and we can't always stop them. The times change, and churches need to change along with them. Although we may not want the church to change, change is inevitable and positive. Change guided the Israelites to a new land and a new life. Change guided me from believing in God to having a personal relationship with Him. What will change bring to New St. James?

The following is a portion from the last sermon at Canada Youth by The Rev. Dr. Emily Bisset. She was referring to the new young leaders at Canada Youth. I've modified her sermon slightly to refer to the new minister (man or woman) we are search for.

A new leader will soon be coming into our midst; someone who has the courage to step up and be vulnerable enough to share his gifts with us. We will need to encourage him, alleviate his fears, and let him know that we are behind him. We are in this together. Together, we can boldly engage the church in new ways of thinking, acting, serving and loving. Together we can boldly explore our faith. Together we can speak Truth to power, we can resist hatred, and we can tear down prejudices. Together we can build up the church, we can show the world that Christians are thoughtful, smart, compassionate people; we can make room at the table for every body, and every voice. Together we can trust in the faithfulness of God in the past and we can help each other see God at work right now in our midst, and we can live into a future together where God is calling us all to bear witness to the Gospel of love in new ways. Together, we will gain courage to try out the possibilities for creative ministry without fear of failing. Together we go from strength to strength by reminding each other that God is with us and will show us the way.

Joshua didn't have all the answers for the challenges before him. But he was counseled to go forward anyway, acting in faith, because the Lord would be with him. Like Joshua, we seldom have all the answers to our personal challenges. But there is comfort in knowing that when we turn to the Lord for guidance, we will succeed because He has the answers we need.

New St James is standing on the edge between who we have been and who we are going to be. We are at a time that will bring many changes, and many new and exciting challenges. No matter what those changes and challenges may be, God will see us through them. All we have to do is keep being the people we are, people of God. We are a congregation who cares: We care for our youth, we care for our elderly, we care for our shut-ins, we care about our community, and most importantly we care and take time to do God's work. He has given all of us many gifts and He will show us how to put them to use. We have to leave our comfortable place and venture out into the unknown. The unknown, a place where we're afraid to go: Afraid of failing, afraid of getting hurt, afraid to putting ourselves in uncomfortable situations. We must go into that unknown, get out of our depth. Let us face that unknown head on. Let us be strong and of good courage. Let us not be frightened or dismayed. Why? The Lord our God is with us wherever we go. He was with Moses, He was with Joshua, and He will be with us. Amen