

May 1, 2022
Acts 9:1-20
How Real Change Happens
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Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.'

As you look back over your life, in what ways have you changed for the better?

How did the change take place?

Has it been more on the side of being so gradual as to be almost imperceptible or are there events – experiences that stand out as watersheds in your life – experiences that are hinge moments – as in, you were *this way before* the experience but *that way afterward*?

For most of us, I would dare say that it is probably some combination thereof.

Change. If you really stop and think about it, change is at the center of the Christian message. Jesus changed the lives of everyone he encountered. He healed and set free. He loved and forgave the unforgivable. He extended grace where before people had only experienced judgement. He *ex*-changed love for power and died for it.

So, the gospel message, at its heart, is a message of welcome change – transformation – from emotional and spiritual bondage to freedom, from feelings of worthlessness to a renewed sense of value, from a life ruled by power games to a life lived by love, from a life lived in service to self and something less than God, to a life lived fully in the service of who we were intended to be by way of call, vocation, and relationship to a living God – transformation from brokenness to wholeness.

Of course, such 180 degree turnabouts are rarely so straightforward and one-sidedly joy-filled. Such radical change does not happen without some sense of loss. Grasping the new means letting go of the old and that is usually painful.

There was certainly pain involved in Paul's change from persecutor to Apostle. Perhaps that is why later, in his letter to the Romans, he would compare it to a woman in labor: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until (the advent of Christ);" he would say, "and not only the creation, but we ourselves..."

What could be more joyous than the birth of a baby. Yet no birth comes without some physical discomfort if not downright excruciating pain. And the loss that comes with that birth is also great – especially for the mother whose body is now not as it was and never will be again. Her time now is also no longer hers or her partner's – if she has one. The old way of life as either an individual or a couple must in some way be forfeited to make room for the new dynamic that involves a family. The joy of the presence of the child is won by letting go of the old reality. And that involves a loss of the freedoms and time one had before becoming a parent.

Thus, one must, in some sense, *surrender* to the new reality, *surrender* to the process of change involved – *surrender* to the pain of loss – whether that is excruciating or just involves leaving a former place of comfort to embrace being *uncomfortable* for a while.

Even when one is brought to one's knees, as Paul most certainly was, surrender to the process is still needed. Transformation is not guaranteed. But the same can be said for change that happens more slowly over time. What these two ways of change have in common is that both involve making room for something that is other, strange, foreign.

Thus, Divine change initiated by God can be both a kind of uninterrupted experience over a long period of time – a lifetime even, and is thus one that comes as the result of fidelity to a commitment, constantly updating what that means in the present – or it can be a set of powerful, unequivocal experiences that take you to the brink of something totally unexpected, altering you in ways that you could not have imagined.

Either way, openness to the other, the different, the not yet known is the key. In fact, to allow oneself such experiences is to be open to having your very brain rewired, literally.

That's right. Neuroscientists now tell us that the brain has this wonderful built-in resilience to which we have access. They call it *neuroplasticity*. Scientists tell us that the adult human brain has approximately 100 billion neurons and that the experience of surrender to a learning process of any kind *increases* the number of branches among those neurons which *actually increases* the

volume and thickness of the brain. And this can happen either through the experience of learning something new over time, or through an experience that is instantaneous, powerful, and either traumatic, or sublime.

Take sudden blindness for example, which evidently happened to Saul while on the road to Damascus, after which, he was without sight for three days. As it turns out, neuroscientists have learned that if you *were* to wear a blindfold for three days, your visual cortex would reorganize itself to process sound and touch in new ways. You would become more attuned to your body and as a result, your brain would begin to rewire itself, literally giving you a different experience of the world.

Another fascinating example comes from a group of people known as Sea Gypsies. Sea Gypsies or Sea Nomads are a nomadic people living in a cluster of tropical islands in the Burmese archipelago. They spend most of their lives in boats on the open sea and the amazing thing about *them* is that unlike everyone else, they can see clearly under water at great depths. They have actually learned to control the shape of their lenses and the size of their pupils, constricting them 22 percent. Most of us can't do that, and before studying them, pupil adjustment had been considered to be a fixed, innate reflex.

And then there are the brains of London taxi drivers. The result of a study comparing their brains with those of London bus drivers revealed that taxi drivers have a larger hippocampus compared to bus drivers. It's because this region of the brain is specialized in acquiring and using complex spatial information in order to navigate efficiently. Taxi drivers have to constantly learn new ways to navigate around London whereas bus drivers follow a limited set of predetermined routes. For more, see Anastasia Pryanikova, "15 amazing examples of neuroplasticity in action," brainalchemist.com, May 4, 2010. Retrieved December 4, 2018.

All of this is telling. It indicates that those who limit themselves to rote experiences over a lifetime not only have smaller brains, but they, themselves may cease to grow, change, adapt and evolve. Their very capacity for experiencing the richness of life diminishes; their capacity for wholeness and connection may actually begin to shrink.

So new experiences – inner ones through the use of imagination – and outer ones, through new external exposures, rewire the brain.

That rewiring happens in four basic ways –

1. When one practices a new skill over time,
2. Related to that but somewhat different secondly is when one, opens oneself to fully taking in new information, new insights, and new experiences with the intention of integrating those into a possible new frame of reference.
3. Then three, as I said, when there is trauma to one part of the brain, psyche, and/or body, and finally

4. When one has a powerful, emotionally laden experience whether that experience that is neither trauma nor elation somewhere in between – something that is sublime.

While on the road to Damascus that fateful day, Paul had his brain rewired. He was knocked to the ground and blinded which was a trauma to his body, he had a direct unequivocal, fear-inducing, awe-inspiring encounter with the risen Christ that was sublime, and he spent several days among his former enemies who he was now opening himself up to being his new friends. From then on, he would practice the skill of being an apostle of Christ.

Which of these four ways have you allowed yourself to be changed for the better and which ways, if you are honest, have you perhaps resisted?

I have changed via every way except through trauma. I have been spared that. However, I have worked with many people who were traumatized. I would not wish that on anyone. It is a poor way to institute positive change and is as likely to leave one dis-abled as it is to expand one's repertoire of able-ness. However, those who do, by the Grace of God, integrate said trauma, tend to be the greatest true healers *on* the planet.

As *I* have shared with you before, I have had powerful, vivid religious dreams that changed my whole attitude and sent my life in whole new and wonderful directions. I have participated in significant life changing learning events throughout my adult life. I have been and continue to be blessed to receive teachings and training from some of the most learned and gifted teachers on the planet. Those experiences have been and continue to be very important to me.

They changed my whole understanding of God from being some kind of supreme and dominating power *over* nature to a God who is in loving partnership with it. those experiences birthed a new knowledge that all things are in God and in loving relationship to God. Therefore God is in all things. All of life is sacred – not just the Church and its revelation in Christ. The Spirit is incarnate everywhere ready to surprise us in unexpected ways if we will but remain open to it. Indeed, the Spirit of the Living God is alive and at work trying to make all things new, all the time, everywhere.

But I have also been no less changed by the experience of practicing a lifelong commitment to Janet, my wife of nearly 36 years and the Church to which I have been committed as a minister for 35. In fact, the experience of my commitment to Janet in marriage through all the vagaries of life over these many years informs how I counsel others in their loving relationships; and my lifelong commitment to God in Christ through the Church informs how I interpret the unorthodox, but powerful experiences of God that I have had and still remain open to. But more importantly, these commitments have grounded me in the practical reality of being human and changing with another and with a community to whom I believe God has called me.

Whether we change and *how* we change are important; for like it or not, monumental change is afoot. I believe God is leading the world away from an either/or way of perceiving everything – away from a black versus white, matter versus spirit, absolute right versus absolute wrong, man versus woman, marriage verses singleness, church member versus non-church member, doubt versus faith – way of perceiving reality – to something else altogether.

Gender identity is now understood now by the majority of those under forty in our culture as fluid. More and more it is becoming common practice to let people know what pronoun you prefer to be called by, such as he/him/his, she/her/hers, they/them/theirs or something else altogether.

Last fall, I began to supervise a woman who is seeking to become a licensed relationship counselor and as such have discovered that I now have to make room for how to guide her in counseling, with compassion, those in polyamorous relationships – that is more than one committed partner. As you well know, it is something well beyond *my* experience, but something I see as a new opportunity for me to learn how to love and understand in a way that is quite strange and other than *my* own experience.

Profound cultural change is afoot and if God is behind that, then the church will need to learn how to respond with compassion, which, for most of us, will certainly require a change – perhaps quite a big one.

The good news is that God as revealed in Jesus Christ is a both/and kind of God – a god of law *and* of grace, a god of justice *and* mercy, a God who by the Holy Spirit comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable, bringing a new order to a confusing chaos and a new chaos to an old dying order.

The God of the universe became human in Jesus. We should therefore not be surprised if that God shows up in a powerful way through a mountain that we hike, a marriage that is hard, a church community that most of the time we take for granted, or a new way of conceiving of human togetherness altogether.

The great existentialist theologian, Paul Tillich said that “Faith means being grasped by a power that is greater than we are, a power that shakes us and turns us, and transforms and heals us” and that, “Surrender to this power is faith.” Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (Scribner’s, 1955), Chapter 5.

How is God’s power moving in your life right now for change? *To* what, and *by what way* may God be trying to open you up and reroute your brain in a way that leads TO God?

The founding father of the Reformation, Martin Luther once said, “It is God’s nature to make something out of nothing; hence one who is not yet nothing, out of him God cannot make anything.” Martin Luther, *Commentaries on Psalms* (LW 14:163).

We therefore need to keep what the Buddhists call “beginner’s mind” as we approach this precious life we’ve been given – to assume that we know less than we think. To do this, we need to let our hearts lead the way. Every one of us is a lover before we are a thinker, a body before we are a mind. It is an open heart that truly leads an open mind – one that is ripe for allowing God to break in.

God is constantly attempting to change us all by breaking into us through the new experiences of life to which we remain open. And so, in closing, please join me in reading together the prayer entitled “You Break In” that now appears on the screen.

You Break In

You break in, O God, on the road

You break in, O God, exactly the way we don't believe

You break in, O God, and change everything

You break in, O God, with a call

You break in, O God, with an invitation

You break in, O God, with the truth

You break in, O God, with a new realm

You break in, O God, with a new world

You break in, O God, with your intent for the future

God, break in again and call us to be your workers

God, break in again and use the gifts we *are* to build your realm

God, break in again and change our world once more.

—*Roddy Hamilton, posted on the New Kilpatrick Parish Church website. nkchurch.org.uk.*

Amen.