

“Thank You, God, for Change . . . Really?”

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Lately, I have been thinking a lot about change. It seems that no matter which way I turn, I am faced with something new and different. What had kind of been a more settled time for me in 2019 all got upended in March of 2020. I'm sure to some degree, everyone here would have similar feelings. The world as we knew it changed overnight. We were apprehensive and confused about what was next. Although it is still with us, the pandemic has almost become a page 2 story (at least we hope so), but now has been displaced by the war in Ukraine, inflation, the widening gap between rich and poor, social justice issues, and the impact of the historical shift in the legal philosophy and decision making of the Supreme Court.

As I've reflected on present day issues, I've been thinking a lot about history and how it might inform us as we face what seem to be overwhelming challenges. I get a daily posting from Heather Cox Richardson, an historian who teaches at Boston College and lives in Maine. Just when I think that we are living in the most complex times ever without a way forward, she grounds me in the knowledge of history and the resolutions that follow. I'll just point to the Fourteenth Amendment as a great example, giving all citizens equal protection under the law. Today, I would like to spend some time looking at historical stories from both an individual and corporate perspective that might be helpful as we navigate some very turbulent seas.

I retired in 2007 from a company that I had worked at for over twenty years. We had operations all over the world and as chief operating officer, I spent a lot of time in airports and hotels. We were a very successful company from not only a financial perspective, but also an employee perspective and an innovation perspective. While I was energized by the people that were part of our company, sometimes the business challenges became overwhelming. Our primary market was the automotive industry, which quite often acted as a gorilla with their suppliers. In addition, the board of directors had recently selected a new CEO and ousted a CEO to whom I had reported for over twenty-five years in two different companies and in a variety of different positions. The new CEO and I spent about a year together, but we had different strategic visions for the company's future. And frankly, I was fatigued. So, we parted ways, and now, for the first time in over forty years, I was facing a new and different world where my daily routine didn't dictate my day. My first thought was I'm going to play a lot of golf, so I signed up for a couple of lessons, played seven days straight, and with all these new swing thoughts from my lessons swirling around in my head, I subsequently finished last in a tournament. I knew that this would not be my future!

On the constructive side, a good friend recommended that I read a book titled *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, by William Bridges. In it, he lays out a very simple yet challenging formula for dealing with transition. He says “all transitions are composed of (1) an ending, (2) a neutral zone, and (3) a new beginning. Also, “Transition is the natural process of disorientation and reorientation marking the turning points in the path of growth. . . . Every

transition begins with an ending. We have to let go of the old thing before we can pick up the new one.” This was hard for me; the business world had been such an important part of my life.

So, as I prayerfully began to wrestle with “what’s next”, I started to draw on different transition stories from the Bible. While there are certainly many of these in the Old Testament, I was drawn to the New Testament and the early followers of Christ and the emerging Christian Church. So, I began with Simon Peter, a wonderfully complex disciple. As we know, when Jesus began his ministry, he was walking along the shore of Lake Galilee and spotted Peter and his brother Andrew fishing. Jesus invites them to come with him and that he will teach them to catch men. Can you imagine being in Peter’s skin? Just like that he drops his net and follows Jesus to who knows what end? I have always wondered what moved him.

Was he just tired of fishing or was he feeling a strange but deep sense of call by this person Jesus that he barely knew. Peter and the disciples traveled with Jesus throughout Galilee, and on a momentous day, Jesus called twelve to be his apostles, renamed Simon to be Peter, and charged him and the other apostles to preach and to have the authority to drive out demons. Can you imagine? How many of us in our lives have heard God’s call that we just couldn’t fathom but we decided to take the scary leap. Just weeks before, Peter had been a fisherman and now he was being asked by Jesus to preach and drive out demons. During Jesus’s ministry, Peter is often with him and only one or two other apostles in the most sacred situations, including the transfiguration when Jesus became dazzling white and was joined by Moses and Elijah. How do you think you would have responded? Yet he is also rebuked by Jesus, saying once get away from me Satan! Then, of course, Jesus predicts that Peter will deny Him, and Peter vehemently denies this. We know how this all plays out in the garden of Gethsemane, and he breaks down in tears after the cock crows three times.

Jesus is crucified. For Peter, this is the ending, and one of enormous proportions. He has invested the last three years of his life being Jesus favored apostle, Peter— On this rock I will build my church—but now Jesus is gone. Peter is about to enter the neutral zone, with all of these amazing experiences shaping who Peter will become, and ultimately the leader of the emerging Christian Church.

The disciples are scared. They gather in an upstairs room, together with many of the women. But finally, Peter begins to emerge as the leader and the day of Pentecost arrives. Peter, the fisherman, becomes the spokesperson for this new faith community on that day, and begins to lead this upstart church into a new beginning. He has finally grown from a fisherman to a fisher of men, and the new beginning could not have come about without the three years of preparation that Jesus gave him. New beginnings look to the past for experience, but once endings come, we need to spend some time in the neutral zone to move into bold new directions.

A second biblical person who is best known for a dramatic ending is Saul who we have come to know as Paul. A persecutor of Christians, one day he is knocked off of his horse, blinded, eventually after three days given restored sight by Ananias, and immediately began to preach from his heart, a heart that had led him to kill Christians and now a heart that had been transformed to preach from that same heart that Jesus was the son of God. This may be one of the shortest personal neutral zones on record. There was no blueprint for this emerging church,

but Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, in particular, continued preaching the word and establishing communities of faith in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ. This didn't always go well. Paul and Barnabas separated, communities of faith were in constant need of reinforcement as evidenced by all of Paul's travels and multiple letters. I guess I view this as the early church's neutral zone. Eventually, and over time, home churches with what we call today "lay leadership" were what moved the emerging Christian faith into new beginnings that led to a faith community that was eventually recognized by Roman Emperor Constantine as the official religion of the Roman Empire. The early Christians spent time in the neutral zone experimenting, having successes and failures, but eventually a faith community emerged that was so strong, even the mighty Romans adopted it.

I think there are lessons here for Centre Street Church. We are facing an ending next month when Pastor Susie leaves the pulpit. We will then be in a neutral zone, one which needs to be informed by our past experiences but also informed by present day realities, and not one where we are treading water. As Paul and Peter and the early Christians did, they faithfully experimented with new ways of being church. Look at what this congregation did during Covid. Who would have thought that Harper and the team (and thank you Harper and the team) would have become these multi-platform media technologists! Who knew that we could be church, and a vibrant church at that, through media. I think that great possibilities lie ahead when we spend a little time in the neutral zone, informed by history, open to God's leading, and willing to find new beginnings if we can put our trust in God and our fellow Centre Streeters.

Okay, so now I am going to swing back to me, because this is my sermon, and it is all about me. Right? What did eventually happen to me back in 2007? I spent some time in discernment, my neutral zone. I had long been part of a not-for-profit organization that accompanied individuals and businesses eager to integrate moral reasoning and spiritual imagination into their work life. During a national meeting with practitioners and associates, one of the founders looked at me and said, "You know, you would make a perfect executive director for this organization. What do you think?" It didn't take me long to accept, and for the next eight years, I was the volunteer Executive Director for an organization called Seeing Things Whole. This too came to an end, when in 2017 we gifted all of our work to Augsburg University in Minneapolis to start a new, exciting chapter in the life of this important work. Oh, by the way, I am now back to working on my golf game.

Endings, neutral zones, new beginnings. They happen over and over in our lives, giving us so many opportunities as individuals, as congregations, as communities, as businesses, and as a nation to move in new directions. One of my favorite sayings is that we are all perpetually a work in process. We just need to look for God's guidance and take advantage of the possibilities.

May it be so. Amen.