

Morning! My name is Shelley. My husband, Brad, and I have been a part of Catalyst for nearly 8 years now. A couple of months ago we moved so we haven't gotten to be around as much as we used to.

[1 **Shelley Family Christmas**] I don't know about your family, but my family always knew how to do Christmas RIGHT. Let me tell you the right way to do Christmas. Growing up when Christmas Break started, we would binge watch all the Scrooge movies we could get our hands on....we had them all memorized! When we got done, we'd start "White Christmas" and every Christmas season included a little tear when Linus lit up our hearts by quoting the Christmas story on "Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown!" When we got through with those, my brother and I might practice gift-giving and choose something from our rooms, carefully wrapping it, knocking on each other's doors and running. We would open the door, act surprised to see a gift and rip it open with anticipation. Sometimes we would draw names in our family to give homemade gifts. We ALWAYS had a real tree. And we would listen to Handel's Messiah or the radio station that started playing Christmas music since Thanksgiving and we would carefully sift through YEARS of precious ornaments, cautiously deciding which to put on the tree and which to leave in the box. The fireplace would always stay glowing as my Dad was a master fire builder. Oooo and every EVERY Christmas Eve we celebrated my grandparents' anniversary by eating Mexican food. Then on Christmas morning, every single gift was wrapped, even the ones in our stockings...and we opened them one by one, stopping for a coffee cake break in the middle.

Then, I met Brad's family.

[2 **Shelley Joins the Family**] Let's just say that they didn't really do Christmas "right." They watched..."A Christmas Story." They had a fake tree. They didn't decorate it altogether. (Granted, his mom created a masterpiece that looked like it was from a magazine.) Sometimes there was music...the tape was called "Cow Christmas." Life isn't really complete till you've heard the "Halle-moo-yah Chorus." Their fireplace had a light switch. Stockings weren't that big a deal and things were rarely wrapped. They ripped open their gifts all at once. And the biggest shocker...they didn't even really like Mexican food.

It was really hard that first Christmas I was away from the "right" way to do Christmas. If you know me at all or heard one of my other Sundays, you know I like things to go my way. Being in a new family, adjusting to their "right" way was a HUGE change. I fought that change for a few years. You know what it did? It made Brad miserable. It made his family miserable. In the end, I was miserable. Finally, I had the answer. I would take Christmas to them! I would bring my movies and music and special ornaments and Mexican food and repeated subtle suggestions to get a real tree! And you know what? It still wasn't the same. Now I was trying to force them to do things my way, which was not the "right way" for them.

[3 **Brad and Shelley Christmas**] Brad and I have been married for 13 years now. Before we had kids, we split the holidays. One year, we were at his folks' for Christmas, the next was mine, and so on. That was good. Sort of. I still kind of wished for those two weeks of "right Christmasing" every year. Once the girls were born, we decided we were going to start our own "right Christmasing." We made decisions for ourselves and what would be best for the four of us. Some of the things we do are from my family traditions, and some are from his, some are ones I got from Pinterest, but they are all ours.

That change was many years in the making, mostly because I fought it. If only I'd known that the result of the changes would be such a beautiful Christmas. None of us enjoys change - it's hard, painful and scary. But last week, JR. spoke about the journey Catalyst is beginning into the future. He asked us to begin by asking if we WANT to go, because every journey begins with desire. That desire creates a "gap" between where you are and where you want to be. In order to bridge that gap, we must leave where we are to go somewhere new. We considered last week what our individual journeys might be: Maybe a job change or a new relationship. Maybe a new life stage or maybe a journey of healing or forgiveness. What all of these have in common is change. Following our loves is a journey, and you can't go unless you leave. We must expect change.

That's why we need Advent - the season that leads us to Christmas. Advent is the anticipation of change. Advent is for people who refuse to stay safe and comfortable. As a church, we aren't really sure what our church will be in the next 10 years. [4 "**Change is Coming.**"] But we know that it is changing. That changing is the price of discovering what the future holds.

I know what you're thinking. "Shel, that's scary because I like Catalyst the way it is! That's why I came here and stayed here! What are you saying? Not change! Ahhh I can't take it!" [5 **Christmas Stressed**] Ok first of all, you sound a little stressed. You're totally right. Change is scary. And you know, change is a cost. It is going to cost me something, I just know it. What will I lose? My comfort? My pride? My favorite song? The person I have counted on most?

If we at Catalyst DESIRE this journey toward what God has for us, change must come first. Think about it-a journey starts with leaving. And even leaving is a change. As we embark on this journey of change, we know God is calling us into it, and that is great news. God is calling us on a journey of discovery that requires change and He will walk alongside us as He calls us in this move forward.

[**Scripture Slide**] During this series, we're listening to the Prophets who guided Israel through the changes they faced as God called them forward, as they anticipated the birth of the Messiah. So today, please find Malachi 3 in your Bible. If you are using one from the back table, we will read the first 4 verses found on page ###. If you need a Bible, please keep it, it's yours.

Looking back, we realize that God has always been calling His people to change and be changed. As I thought through every story I could remember in the Old Testament, God was always inviting Israel forward. The biggest change Israel ever faced was the Exile - when Babylon conquered God's people, destroyed their civilization. After the Exile, God's people were in a place that they didn't want to be, longing for a change. God promises that change if only they would have faith in Him. 70 years later, God came through: the Persian empire conquered the Babylonians and God's people were allowed to return to their homeland. Their Exile seemed to be over.

Which brings us to Malachi, one of the prophets. As a prophet, Malachi spoke on behalf God to the people. A generation or so after the Jews have returned home, Malachi lived among a wretched and deplorable people. Even though the promised Messiah hadn't come, they were back in their homeland, and many of them figured that was good enough. They quit being faithful to God. They got comfortable. They quit waiting. Malachi reminded them that God's Messenger was still coming to bring hope to their distressed and messy world. He claimed that the changes God had in store would stun the world. Let's read his 3rd chapter, verses 1-4. I am reading from The Message.

This is a message from the mouth of GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies: "Look! I'm sending my messenger on ahead to clear the way for me. Suddenly, out of the blue, the Leader you've been looking for will enter his Temple—yes, the Messenger of the Covenant, the one you've been waiting for. Look! He's on his way!"

"But who will be able to stand up to that coming? Who can survive his appearance?"

"He'll be like white-hot fire from the smelter's furnace. He'll be like the strongest lye soap at the laundry. He'll take his place as a refiner of silver, as a cleanser of dirty clothes. He'll scrub the Levite priests clean, refine them like gold and silver, until they're fit for GOD, fit to present offerings of righteousness. Then, and only then, will Judah and Jerusalem be fit and pleasing to GOD, as they used to be in the years long ago.

God's "Messenger" (who, spoiler alert!, was Jesus) is coming like a white-hot fire on silver... a precious metal very difficult to refine. He is coming like the strongest soap to clean allllll your dirty laundry. OH yes Malachi, these changes sound... awesome. [6 Natural Silver] All I can think of is a hammer slamming down on a glowing piece of silver or a strong-armed grandma taking my shirt to a washboard. None of that sounds like something I want to go through. [7 Side by side] But then I began to think of what silver looks like after it has been refined... shiny, new, smooth, worth quite a lot. I thought about what my clothes look and smell like after a good washing... bright, crisp, fluffed, scent of sunshine, and ready to slip into. The change is what made the silver worth anything. The change made my shirt wearable again. God's changes are scary, difficult, maybe even harsh... but oh so purifying. He uses the change to make us new.

So we have established that change is a good thing, right? I mean, right??? It all still sounds pretty terrifying to me. And even Malachi- a prophet!- asks, Who will be able stand through all of this? Who will even survive his very appearance? For weeks now,

we have been telling you that change is coming...and we don't know what it is. We have been saying that Rowlett is changing and we need to change too. We are to love those people who are different than we are, serve them, and grow as we do it. We are trying to create a space where everyone can embrace their God-given calling. But all of this is in preparation for...??? I mean, we don't actually know the destination, we are just beginning this journey. But whatever it is, Malachi is helping us to feel its heavy, daunting shadow.

But that's actually ok.

Change is uncomfortable. It's messy. It stretches me in ways I don't like. It uses a white-hot fire or a washboard and lye. Change is never easy. It's a cost that comes with choosing to take a journey of discovery. [8 refined silver] If we are to ever know the refinement of the silver, we must pay the price of change. We must accept it as a piece of our journey to discovering what God has in store for each of us, for Catalyst, for Rowlett, for North Texas. It's the results that make the change worth it. If we look back to Malachi, he speaks on the good results of change. He promises a restoration. This is great news! For, on the other side of our journey of change, there are beautiful and better things. And we know God, who has called us to this journey of change is faithful to meet us there.

It was a Sunday afternoon in Rowlett, spring, nearly summer. Warm enough to throw off the prison of indoors and just be. I sat in the grass, toes feeling the cool water trickle to our newly planted pine tree plucked from my father-in-law's acreage. I turned to look at our girls running, laughing, in front of our just perfect-for-us home. I was feeling that sense of peace you get on special days when all is just right.

[9 City Bloomers] My husband, Brad, did a great job of making this secure life possible. Within a 45 minute commute every day and sometimes a romantic life of travel (miles and hotel rewards!), his salary and benefits added to that peace. Sure his IT desk job was a little soul-sucking but it totally supported our lifestyle. I loved my job. I taught at an urban school where the students needed to be loved on first in order to learn and it was hard yet fulfilling work. I had Firewheel Mall, fun restaurants, and Super Target within Blue Bell ice cream melting range. I loved Rowlett's cute downtown parades and city activities. I thought through this life that I loved so much and took in a deep sigh of contentment.

Brad came and sat by me in the grass. I could tell something laid heavy on him. He began to tell me his heart. He felt we needed a change. He was ready for it. He had in mind a new adventure, a journey of discovery, not sure of the end result.

He wanted to become farmers.
Chicken farmers.

Oh...

I mean, I had always lived in the city. I finally painted the walls in my perfect house and hung all my pictures in the right spots. I lived really close to all the shopping a girl could ask for! And all these cool places to eat! Our church! How would we ever go to church anywhere else? What about the girls? They just started school. My family all lived here. We were moving HOW far? WITH how many acres? I'll have to search for a new job? YOU'RE going to take how much of a pay-cut???

And that was all in the first 5 seconds.

Then...I saw in Brad the passion he felt for this change and I opened my heart to it, little by little.

I started this journey by finally caving to my realtor's encouragement to neutralize my house by painting over my peacock blue wall. Y'all. I loved my wall. You laugh, but for me, my wall was a first, small step on a journey of change. A journey I knew I wanted. A journey that has been an adventure every step. But that small step led to larger steps.

We sold our neutral colored house.

We moved in with my parents for 7 months!

We found the perfect farm...41 acres and 2 HOURS away.

I was hired at an amazing school by our farm.

We had lots of help from you wonderful people to get moved in.

We started to try and build community in the small town of Omaha, TX.

Our chicks were delivered...in the mail!

[10 Bloomer Farm Pic] This morning, for the first time, Brad packed up chickens that carry our "The Farm Next Door" label. Pretty cool. I would guess our adventure is far from over. But here is what I know right now- I know that we could have continued on living in our perfect for us home with the peacock blue wall. I know life would still have been just as wonderful here with you lovely people, and our families. But choosing to make these changes, to go through this adventure, has helped me to understand Malachi. I feel like the other side of that white-hot fire has refined me into someone new and shiny. I have been restored in a way I never would have been able to if we would have ignored the Holy Spirit's grasp on Brad's heart. Good has come from the changes I accepted on this journey of discovery. But it wasn't easy.

The only thing that would have helped me with becoming Farmer Shelley, is if I'd had the opportunity to practice first. ☺ If I could have just practiced some of those changes first so I could get good at change...man, that would have been quite helpful! Sounds kind of silly but could we really do this? I mean, change for me, at this point in my life is really easy. A year ago, not so much. So what happened? Well, honestly, my journey WAS the practice. All those little, simple changes made way for more changes until changes were just part of who I am. I am sure at some point it MIGHT slow down, but at this point I have inoculated myself with small changes. [11 Iocane Powder] It's like when

Westley from “The Princess Bride” drinks a little bit of iocane powder everyday so his body is resistant to its effects. He then can use the poison on his enemies with confidence, knowing that he is free to drink from either cup. My immunities to change have begun wear down as these small changes make medium changes not look so bad. Maybe someday, larger changes won’t be so rough either. But not yet. I’m not quite there.

But, I guess, neither were the Israelites. Malachi basically tells them Christmas is coming. Malachi says the greatest gift, beyond what you can handle is coming to change the world and religion and people. And they were just not ready for it either. If only they could have learned through the smaller changes to be ready and prepared for when God takes you on a new journey. Advent is the perfect season of preparation. We look back to Israel, on a journey of recovery after The Exile, anticipating the Messiah. They knew change was coming. We know change is coming. How can we prepare?

[12 Little Changes on advent path] Maybe we can embark on this idea of practicing change to get ready for change together. Maybe we can begin to add small changes into our routines in preparation for the white-hot fire, the lye soap and washboard. Maybe we can even figure out some way to add small changes to our Christmas traditions as a way to ready ourselves. Could you forego a few gifts beneath the tree to pay for an extra Rowlett Angel? Maybe buy the person’s breakfast behind you in the drive thru? Perhaps think of the damage a misunderstood comment might cause on social media? I don’t know what your small change may look like for you.

Catalyst is being called to change. And we are free to say no! I like my “right way” of doing things! I love my peacock blue wall! You can refuse the change. The risk you run of ignoring the cost of the journey is higher than you might think. A single person’s refusal to the nudging toward change is a risk of sabotage. A risk of failure. It is an abort to the mission. It is the cost of not reaching the good restoration that our faithful God has promised. It is allowing the anxiety of change to keep us from meeting Him there at the end of the journey of discovery.

Advent is the season we admit our anxiety. When we name our fear of change. After all, what is the Christmas story if not an example of how fear was part of the journey? Israel, anticipating the change a Messiah would bring, yet fearful of these same changes. Mary, a young girl, unmarried and VERY pregnant, set out on a journey where she could not even find a place to stay. Joseph, the man whose betrothed was already with child and an angel...AN ANGEL...tells him to stay with her anyway. I mean, was this REALLY the right way to go about beginning a family? The wisemen, spending years, forsaking their king and other research, to follow a star?

And yet...“the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

What if we embrace change, not because it’s easy but because the One who has called us is faithful? What would that look like? What could that mean for your life and our lives together? For our journey of discovery? We can be a people who are unafraid of change

because we know change leads to life and a future. And no, it's not easy. We aren't saying it's easy. We are saying we can handle it because God is faithful. He's called us and He is faithful.

Choosing small changes now makes us a people who are ready to change as God calls us. So what is my next right step this Advent season?

Communion Set-Up

Embracing change begins at the Communion Table for us - the table that invites us back to the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed. The night he gave us bread, told us it was his body broken for us. The night he passed around a cup of wine, told us it was his blood poured out as a new covenant, a new relationship between God and humanity.

This table reminds us that God embraced change for us: God became human, took on flesh and blood, knowing full well that the cross lay ahead of him in that journey. And yet God willingly embraced the pain of that change because he loved us.

Today, God invites us to the table to participate in that journey. To embrace the pain of change as the pain of the refiner's fire, the launderer's lye. You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to come to the table today. If you're willing to follow God's call, to embrace the pain of change for the sake of the people in our world, then you're welcome to come.

I'm going to ask you to reflect prayerfully on three questions, and then I'll pray for us as we approach the table.

1. What small changes can I commit to make this week?
2. How can I be open to a new journey?
3. Where do I see Catalyst in 10 years?

Prayer

God, thank you for this good news we have heard this morning: that though the pain of change looms ahead of us, it is the pain of refinement, of purification. We have heard from your prophet Malachi this morning that you call us forward, away from the places where we are comfortable because you love us.

You have spoken to us this morning, whispered into our hearts how you are calling us to change, to step forward, to leave the places we are. We confess we are afraid to leave, to grow, to face the pain of change.

As we approach your table this morning, may these wafers and juice become a spiritual food for us. Remind us again of your love for us, the love that compelled you to the change of the Incarnation, the change we anticipate in the Christmas story. The love that

compelled you to embrace even the pain of the cross. May our approach to your table this morning represent our participation in your love.

As we leave your table, may we leave with hearts full of that same love, and may that love compel us to embrace the changes you're calling us to as individuals and as a church. May we leave from here as your body, broken for our world. May we leave as an announcement of good news, of love.

We offer these prayers, and approach the Table this morning in the name of your son, Jesus.

Catalyst, may we be a people unafraid of change in this Advent season, and know that these changes are leading us to a life and future with the God who has called us to be faithful and that He will meet us there. Go in the grace and peace of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.