

Welcome

What are the most profound ways you've changed in your lifetime?

I find this to be a fun thought experiment, especially if - like me, you have some strong opinions.

I'm talking about changes so stark your younger self would wonder if you'd been kidnapped and replaced by a pod person.

When I was in high school, I was convinced I was going to be a physicist. Pretty different from a pastor.

I specifically said I was never going to be one of those people covered in tattoos.

I didn't like coffee, asparagus or mustard. (Weird I know but I love all those now.)

My beliefs have changed a lot too. I grew up in a very conservative Christian church, so I was convinced the earth was only 6,000 years old. That Jesus only cared about individual salvation not change in the world. That being gay was a sin.

I've changed a lot since I was younger. I think most of us have (except the young ones among us... don't worry: you'll change a lot too!)

It points to a truth we don't like to acknowledge: change is inevitable. But at the close of this series today, I want to suggest we *celebrate* change rather than avoid it. Because change is evidence God is with us, continuing to work. God is forming us into a people, a church, that is fit to be God's loving representatives to an always-changing world!

Message

Today, we're concluding a series called New Leaf. For six weeks, we've been looking at the nature of big change. Change happens to us all the time, at every level. Our church is changing. For almost 15 years, we've been a building-centric, locally focused congregation. But over the last few years, our circumstances have changed and we just voted on a new direction for our congregation. That's scary. I don't know very many people who love change, who seek it out. Most of us prefer predictability and stability, and one thing we know about change is that it's seldom predictable or stable.

So we've spent the last few weeks looking at some people in Scripture who had to face big changes - changes that felt as existential as the changes we're facing right now. We're going to explore the nature of the changes they faced, compare them to the changes facing us, and we're going to ask what we can learn about how to be faithful now from how they were faithful then.

Today, we're concluding with what I hope is a powerful, hopeful look at what's next. This hope doesn't diminish the change in front of us - quite the contrary. I want to name it and affirm that God's invitation that's ahead of us.

So: let's talk about one of the biggest changes in the whole bible. Let's talk about a guy named Saul.

Turn with us to Acts 9.

This Saul is not King Saul, though he's named after him. No, this is the Saul who becomes Paul the apostle. The guy who ends up writing about a quarter of our New Testament. The first Christian missionary. The guy who's really responsible for Christianity spreading across Europe.

We often refer to this story as the story of Paul's 'Conversion', but a lot of biblical scholars don't like to use that word. Because they don't think Saul would have used it himself.

Saul saw himself as a faithful Jewish man - a true son of Abraham. Saul considered himself the most faithful of God's servants on earth. Saul couldn't imagine a world in which Yahweh, the god *he* called Lord, and Jesus were one and the same.

So let's be clear here: it was Saul's very faithfulness to God that made him so opposed to Jesus. With that in mind, let's read about Saul's fateful road trip:

Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers. So he went to the high priest. He requested letters addressed to the synagogues in Damascus, asking for their cooperation in the arrest of any followers of the Way he found there. He wanted to bring them—both men and women—back to Jerusalem in chains.

As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you, lord?" Saul asked. And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men with Saul stood speechless, for they heard the sound of someone's voice but saw no one!

Saul picked himself up off the ground, but when he opened his eyes he was blind. So his companions led him by the hand to Damascus. He remained there blind for three days and did not eat or drink. — Acts 9:1-9

You've probably heard this story. It's so famous that we often refer to people who undergo a radical change as having had a 'Damascus Road' experience.

We get it, right? Saul leaves Jerusalem looking to kill Christians and arrives in Damascus as a Christian.

But remember how I said that scholars don't like to call this a conversion? Look back at Saul's experience:

When Jesus spoke to him, he didn't say, "Hey Saul, it's time to join a new religion!" He said, "Hey Saul, you were wrong about me. I actually *am* the one they say I am. I *am* the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I *am* Yahweh of the Exodus. I am."

Saul was wrong about *Jesus*. But he didn't change religions. His understanding of what his religion actually was got bigger. Way bigger. It's no accident that Saul became the one who led the way to include Gentiles in the church, and took Jesus' good news all the way to Rome. That all began here.

Friends, on the cusp of our big change, I want to ask if we can believe the same thing that was true for Saul is true for us today: in moving into a new way of doing church, indeed a new way of understanding how to be faithful, we're not reinventing the wheel.

The same God who called us to plant a church in North East Dallas all those years ago is the God who is calling us to build a congregation not tied to a single physical location.

The same God who led us to build a building all those years ago is the same God leading us out of that building now.

Yes it's new. Yes it's strange. Yes it's hard. But the same God who began that good work among us is still with us, even to this moment.

Song

Friends, there's no denying we're on the cusp of a massive change for our congregation. We're no strangers to change - it's happened to us a lot over the last decade. But this is a change we're leaning into. We recognize that much of what we're facing isn't just a reflection of where we are as a local congregation - we're facing a massive shift our whole country is experiencing at a cultural level. God is inviting us to reimagine what faithfulness looks like for a very different world that's coming into being all around us.

So here at the close of this series, I want to look back at the journey we've been on, to reflect on how God is inviting us to our next chapter.

We began by looking at the role of faith in change. Abram encountered a god he didn't know, who invited him into an uncertain future. Despite having very little information. Abram responded with a faith-filled Yes. Friends, again, like Abram, our future is uncertain. We're all coming from a culture where church means some particular and specific ideas. What counts as worship, as serving - these things all have clear meanings because we've grown up in it.

And the future ahead of us is going to look very different. We won't be able to assume people have an interest in religion, that even referencing 'god' will mean much to people. This pluralistic world will make faithful, loving witness to who Jesus is a new challenge for those of us used to the sort of church culture of the past.

We'll do well to remember Abram's faith-filled yes. When it didn't seem like he could ever have a future, God promised to make him fruitful, to bring countless descendants because of his faithfulness.

Friends: I believe God is not finished with us. Far from it. I believe that God is calling us into something wholly new, a way of faithfulness that will be vibrant and meaningful in a changing world.

Next, we explored Joseph's story. Joseph heard God's plan at an early age, but things didn't go Joseph's way. His long life was a series of ups and downs, of promotions and setbacks. It would have been easy for Joseph to give up, to abandon faith in God and claim God had abandoned him first. But Joseph didn't do that. He remained confident that, no matter what others did to him, God was still at work, bringing God's will to fruition. And it turned out Joseph was right.

We've experienced plenty of our own trauma as a church, suffered the painful results of others' wicked decisions. And we're launching into a new season that's wildly unpredictable. Here's what I know for certain:

We're going to fail at some stuff. We're going to make some mistakes along the way. And I'm certain we're going to have to content with the wicked decisions of others. That's just called living life.

I'm also certain that no matter what we face, it won't take God by surprise. God is the one who owns this mission, not us. This church is Jesus' church. And no matter what we face - both the things that are our fault and those that aren't, God will work them all to accomplish God's vision, which is to have a faithful church that's engaging our changing world.

Our next stop was in Egypt, where we witnessed God calling Moses as his people's liberator. Moses was full of excuses - some legitimate and some just desperate. God rejected Moses' insecurities by pointing out again and again that this wasn't Moses' mission at all; this was God's plan, and God took full responsibility for the success or failure. All Moses had to do was respond and follow.

So too, friends, I am confident I'm not qualified for what lies ahead of us. I'm pretty sure none of us is. How could we be, when we're moving into a whole new future? And yet the same God who was with Moses is with us. This is God's plan, God's church, and God's world. Our call is not to be qualified, but to be faithful.

We skipped a thousand years or so to when God's people were returning from Exile. Their holy city and temple were in ruins. Nehemiah led all God's people to join in the work of rebuilding. Far from this being a story of a singular exceptional leader, Nehemiah showed us that, for God's people to thrive requires us to be all-hands-on-deck. There's no such thing as an appendix in the Body of Christ. If we're going to survive and thrive in this new model, it requires all of us!

Last week, we explored Jesus' attitude toward the Temple. He was surprisingly negative toward the Temple, from his cleansing of it to his prediction it would be destroyed. We saw that was because the Temple had morphed from a place where God's people were mobilized to love the world to a place of injustice and oppression, where God's people hid from a world they found threatening.

So too, as our culture changes, it seems the age of the church building is closing too. In Europe, which seems a generation or so ahead of the US in terms of attitude toward organized religion, the churches that are thriving often don't meet in buildings or if they do, it's as an afterthought.

Much as those earliest followers of Jesus had to make the transition from Temple to assembly, we too are making a similar shift. It's challenging. It hits at some of our most deeply held assumptions. But we're not the first of God's people to endure a shift like this. God was faithful to our spiritual ancestors and God will be faithful to us.

And friends, that brings us back to Saul.

It's difficult to overstate how massive this revelation of Jesus was to Saul. He was struck blind - and the metaphor wasn't lost on Saul. He recognized that he had gotten God so wrong, it was as though he had been spiritual blinded. It took Jesus to open his eyes, so to speak.

And that's exactly what happened - God sent a Christian named Ananias to Saul to heal him both physically and spiritually. And then Saul dropped off the grid for a few years. Why?

Because he had to reexamine everything he'd ever believed in light of Jesus. He'd seen himself as the most faithful to God, but it was his very faithfulness that caused him to miss God when God showed up in the flesh. So he took time to relearn everything.

And then he became one of the most powerful forces for Jesus in the history of the world.

So friends: we've got big changes ahead of us. And it's okay to not be okay. It took Saul a few years to get it. Do you know what he did in the meantime? He did what we're going to continue to do: he met with his church to worship, to discuss the Scriptures, to pray together.

We'll continue to listen to how the Spirit calls us forward so that, like Abram, we can offer a faith-filled yes.

We'll continue to step confidently, trusting like Joseph that God is working even in failure for our good.

We'll continue to trust not in our own qualifications but God's presence and provision.

We'll work together, knowing like Nehemiah that God calls each of us to contribute to the overall good.

We'll trust that the same Jesus who called us out of the walls of the Temple is calling us to be his body, the true place in our world where heaven and earth connect.

And like Saul, we'll look to God for our hope and healing, even as we grapple with the changes we're experiencing.

Friends, God is up to something beautiful and new. And I'm so excited to be on this journey with you!

Communion + Examen

We follow Jesus to this table.

How is God calling me to participate in what's next for our church?

What fears or anxieties are keeping me from saying Yes to God's call?

What does it mean for me to step by faith into what God has next for us?

Assignment + Blessing