

## **Through Changes, Moses Trusts And Serves The Lord**

(Deuteronomy 32:1-12; I Thessalonians 5:12-24; Luke 12:22-32)

Sometimes things don't work out the way we thought they would--the way we planned. Sometimes life throws us a curve ball. Sometimes we have the rug pulled out from under us. There are all sorts of phrases that apply for this reality that hits most of us sooner or later--the reality that our journeys of life often take an unexpected turn, right?

A loved one dies. The person we thought we'd be married to forever has an affair. Or, we can't find a job in the field for which we were educated or trained. What we've learned in the past two years with the current economy has further emphasized this reality that "things change." Some who were sure they'd go to college after high school, now find themselves struggling with minimal wage jobs, thinking they'll never be able to save enough money to continue their education. Others who thought they'd retire early, find themselves still working, trying to get back some of what they lost in the stock market. Still others who thought they'd live forever in their houses now have foreclosure signs on their front lawns. Indeed, sometimes things don't work out the way we thought they would--the way we planned.

Now, no one knew this better than Moses. In fact, Moses' life was one unexpected change after another. Moses was condemned to die at birth, when Pharaoh decreed that all Hebrew babies be killed. His little new life took an unexpected turn, though, when his mother gave him a fighting chance at life by placing him in a basket on the river, he was found by a royal princess, and then he was reared in the household of the very man who had decreed his death. The adolescent Moses must have thought that "he had it made in the shade." He had riches, power, authority. But oops.....he killed a man and had to flee Egypt to save his life.

Moses ran away to Midian and began living as a Hebrew, one of those poor people over which he had once ruled as master, and he made his living as a shepherd, spending his time with dirty, unruly animals. A Hebrew shepherd in Midian--a far cry from the life he'd thought he'd have.

And then, one day while he was out with his sheep, Moses looked up and saw a bush that kept burning, never actually burning up. Curious, Moses approached the bush and ended up having a conversation with God. And this conversation with God once again completely changed the direction of his life. For God told Moses that he wanted him to go back to Egypt and free the Hebrew slaves.

Moses no doubt thought that he'd had enough changes in his life though. So he made one excuse after another to God: he wasn't good at public speaking; he didn't know enough about God; the people probably wouldn't listen to him. But God kept finding solutions for all of Moses' excuses. Thus Moses ended up not only going back to Egypt to free the slaves but also having to stay with and shepherd the Hebrews for the next 40 years of his life! And for a lot of that time, the people grumbled against him, just as they grumbled against God, ungrateful for what was being given and sacrificed for them.

Nonetheless, Moses probably found comfort and encouragement in at least knowing where the rest of his life was headed: to the Promised Land. But then, as cruel as it seems, Moses learned that he was not to go into the Promised Land. We don't know for sure why. But what a sad scene it is, on our bulletin covers today, as Moses stood on the mountain looking into the land his people but not he himself would enter. Yes, Moses' life, from beginning to end, was one unexpected turn after another.

So, wouldn't you think that Moses would be angry, bitter, resentful of God? But he wasn't--not at all. In fact, Moses told the Hebrews, and even the new leader, Joshua, that they should and could trust God. Moses said, "Be strong and bold....it is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed" (Deuteronomy 31:7-8).

Coming from a man whose life, time and time again, hadn't gone in the direction he expected, these are valuable words. For these words tells us that at the end of his life, when Moses looked back at his life, he was able to testify that no matter what curve ball life threw at him, he had been able to be strong and bold because he knew that God was with him and wouldn't fail him or forsake him. These are words for us to remember and hold close to our minds and hearts.

Very few of our lives are like a track meet, in which we run fast and furiously straight ahead and reach our goal. Very few of our lives are like a baseball game, in which we neatly round the corners, making it home. Our lives are more like a football game, in which we have to bend and swerve and change direction over and over again, trying not to get knocked down too much. But we do get knocked down, and then we have to pick ourselves up and start over again, and come at our goal with a different strategy.

We could also compare our lives to a cross country trip. We map out the trip, begin our journey, and we're going along, progressing as planned, when all of a sudden we hit a sign that says "Your Tax Dollars At Work, Construction Next 50 Miles." Our wonderful plans are dashed, and we have a decision to make. We can decide to stubbornly sit there, still hoping to get through, taking the same planned route, and yet becoming angry as time passes and the route continues to remain closed to us. Or, we can decide to be more flexible, accept that this route is closed to us, and find another way to continue our life's journey.

There was a teenage boy growing up in Decatur, Illinois, who had a passionate interest in photography; in fact, he wanted to make it his life's career. So, he saved up his nickels and dimes, until finally he had enough money to send away for a mail order book on how to get started in photography. But the mail order company made a mistake with the young boy's order and sent him a book on ventriloquism instead. Trouble was: the boy had never heard of ventriloquism, and he didn't have enough money to send the book back. So there he was, a poor disappointed boy in Decatur, Illinois, stuck with a book on something called ventriloquism. His life's journey into the field of photography was interrupted, but the boy was able to adjust to his new situation. He was flexible enough to play with the hand he had been dealt, even though they weren't the cards he wanted. He decided to go ahead and read the book on ventriloquism, and he discovered that he liked it. Later, he got a wooden dummy and began practicing with it. The boy who wanted to be a photographer was named Edgar Bergen, and along with his dummy, Charley McCarthy, they became one of the most famous ventriloquist acts in the world.

The Apostle Paul was also someone who, when a course he was on was no

longer possible, chose flexibility. Paul always chose flexibility because, like Moses, he trusted that wherever he ended up, God would be with him. This happened time and time again in Paul's life. And even at the end of his life, there was another disappointment. Paul really wanted to go to Spain. He wrote about it. He planned for it. But he never made it. His life ended in a prison in Rome. But, like Moses, Paul wasn't angry or bitter with God because his life had been full of unexpected interruptions, for God had always been wherever it was he ended up. So Paul encouraged others, in spite of life's curves to rejoice. The letter he wrote from prison to the Philippians is full of joy. And in another of his letters, to the Thessalonians, Paul talked about the importance of not quenching the Spirit of God. In other words, according to Paul, we should always be open to what God's Spirit can do in and through us--wherever our journey takes us.

Over the years, I've had many people come to talk to me about major decisions facing them. Often there is almost a paralysis that comes over us in the face of a major decision. What if we make the wrong choice? What is the right choice? If only we had a crystal ball! But we really don't need to stress ourselves out so much, for there's no one road that God is down. We need to remember that God will be with us to comfort, encourage, heal, bless, transform, and use us wherever we end up.

What a blessing it is when we relax our frantic control and trust the truth of what Jesus said, when he told his disciples, "do not worry about your life...if God...clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you--you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying...after all these things...your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12).

I think that we all would agree that the ultimate goal of these journeys we call our lives is this kingdom of God about which Jesus spoke. But sometimes the journeys we program into our mental GPS systems become ends in themselves. We become so focused on our plans, the route we have mapped out for ourselves, that the ultimate goal of God's kingdom becomes an after-thought. Thus when our carefully planned journeys come to a halt, when the

rug is pulled out from under us, when life throws us a curve ball, an interruption can turn into an unexpected blessing.

When I taught the Bible study at Truman Farm Villas last Wednesday, one woman talked about how devastated she was when life threw a curve ball at her and she had to leave her house and so many of her things. But now that she's down this new road, she said it's turned out to be not the disappointment she thought it was, the interruption she'd thought it was, but rather a blessing, a new and better life, a simpler and happier life in which she has more time to spend with her family and to listen for and to God.

The weather this past winter seems to have also been teaching us to not get too attached to our plans, right? Time and time again, our plans were unrealized in the face of an unexpected snow or ice storm! It's a hard but important lesson for us to learn--this letting go of our carefully planned agendas so that we can live fully in the present moment.

Today's scripture lessons are a call to all of us to live fully in the present, realizing that wherever we are, we can trust that God is with us, giving us what we need, transforming us, converting us.

You know, there's been so much attention on Paul's blinding conversion experience on the road to Damascus that we think of conversion as something sudden and dramatic--as an event instead of a process. While conversion may start with such an event, it is also be a lifelong process that occurs for those who relax their tight grip on controlling their lives and look for God wherever they are. Spiritual writer Jane Tomaine has said that conversion "encourages a positive and constructive response to change. Conversion...asks us to remain open to the grace that can be found in change. Instead of fighting change, we look to see what we can learn from it. We're willing to evaluate each situation to discern where God is calling us now, rather than just following our old patterns" (Tomaine, Jane, St. Benedict's Toolbox, p. 87).

Thus Esther de Waal, another spiritual writer, says it's important for us to say "yes" to wherever we find ourselves in life. She says, "Yes means that we try to listen to God in all the ways that God is speaking to us. This means that I accept the present and do not try to run away from myself but remain

where I am, firmly rooted and accepting of myself. I pray Yes at the start of every day, accepting what lies ahead and hoping that I may, in all that happens, see and feel and know the presence of God. I pray Yes at the end of every day as I hand all that has happened over to God and ask his blessing on it. So that the Yes I say in prayer gradually becomes my Yes to the whole of life. The Yes that holds everything together; that brings everything into focus and gives it meaning" (Living With Contradiction: An Introduction to Benedictine Spirituality, pp. 140, 142).

Deuteronomy has often been called "the Gospel of the Old Testament." It's good news indeed--the good news of a loving, compassionate, faithfully involved God who is with us wherever we are, gradually revealing himself to us and drawing us closer to himself, gradually weaning us away from trusting in our plans to trusting in him, gradually helping us understand what it means to serve him right where we're at, drawing us ever closer to his kingdom. Thanks be to God for this good news. Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; March 7, 2010