

April 17, 2016

Dever Cunningham

Acts 9:1-20: The Power of Change

You probably don't know this, but they're movies that I really, really, really, love. They're called Star Wars, and I swear to you, it relates to my sermon. In Episode One, Anakin Skywalker has just been freed from slavery, he's really excited to become a Jedi. However, he is devastated when he realizes, his mother is still a slave. He tells her, he's afraid to leave her and venture into the unknown. She replies to him, "You can't stop change any more than you can stop the suns from setting."

Change is a constant no matter the time period or galaxy you're living in. Change also presents challenges for us, whether we like it or not. Challenges can also cause fear, or worry. These feelings are only natural. As human beings, we are resistant to change and we like what we know. But change is not always a bad thing it can bring positive outcomes. The world we live in is changing dramatically.

It can be scary to step into the unknown but God is often calling us to do exactly that, so that we can grow and discover our calling. Saul received a challenge from God, that would change his life significantly. Saul's time was one of incredible change. Christianity was essentially a new born baby, and a new religion

disrupted the order of society in Saul's time. Those who practiced Christianity were being persecuted, and Saul played a key role. In our reading for today, Saul was on his way to Damascus to look for more Christians when he received his challenge from God. A bright light blinded Saul, and Jesus spoke to him, asking "Why do you persecute me?" Then Saul receives Jesus' challenge for him. He tells Saul to go into Damascus and await further instructions. It would have been scary enough not knowing what you are supposed to do, but in addition to that cliff-hanger, he was also unable to see.

Just as there are challenges and change in Saul's life, there are also challenges and changes in my life. Over the course of the past two years, I have grown to dislike change as a result of experiencing a lot of negative change. The past few years have been very hard for my family. Both my Grandmother and my God-father died. These deaths were painful, and I wanted to start avoiding changes. I wanted to build a wall around myself to keep things as they were.

But as my mom reminds me, change can bring more than just bad things, but also good.

Saul may or may not have had the same encouragement, but he still found the strength to put one foot in front of the other. The men he was traveling with had to lead him by hand into the city. It is in Damascus that Saul has his encounter with Ananias. Saul's three day blindness put him in a vulnerable state. He realized that he must accept the reality of the world he lived in. Christianity was not going away, persecuting Christians

would not stamp it out. Furthermore, Saul must accept that God has chosen him as a leader of the Christian movement. He might have imagined running away from God's decision, but as a faithful member of the Jewish community, he probably knew the story of Jonah and the Big Fish. Once God has chosen you to do something, it's hard to run away from it.

Ananias is also in a vulnerable state because he is a Christian. He knows who Saul is. But nonetheless Ananias goes to heal Saul and baptizes him. Saul begins to spread the message of Christianity as Paul.

These days we may not get swallowed by a big fish on a boat out at sea, but God still speaks to us in other ways. As a senior in high school, I am preparing to begin college next year at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. I began to think U-M-B-C was the school for me, the moment I set foot on its campus for my Humanities Scholarship interview.

I sat in the auditorium of the performing arts building, somewhat uncomfortable in my suit and tie, surrounded by so many young people who had similar passions for learning I do. Then I heard the director of my program say to me, "Dever (most people initially call me James), why isn't your name tag on?" It made me feel at home.

Maybe God was guiding me in my choice of schools, but maybe not in the way you would think. I was not blinded by a light and I didn't hear a voice without a face. I had a sense of being pulled to stay close to the city I live in, to help build its future. While U-M-B-C is in

Maryland, college will be a different experience. High school was a change in my life, but I still came home everyday to the same house I have lived for 18 years. Going to college will be difficult because it will be my first time truly living on my own, without my parents around me. Being on my own will be a new challenge in my life. Like Saul, I'm heading into the unknown. I can't say that I fully understand what will happen or who I will meet. But I am willing to put one foot in front of the other and experience this next step. I trust that like Saul I will find a deeper understanding of myself and a deeper understanding of my purpose.

I'm not the only one dealing with change. Especially after the events in April of last year, the city we live in has undergone tremendous change. After April, the city was forced to re-think why the uprising happened in the first place. The people of this city are eager for many changes in the way things have been done. BUILD is an important part of this movement, along with other organizations like my school's own CityBloc (one of City's student activist groups). The change in this city can be positive or negative, and there are many possible outcomes in the city. The day after the Uprising, the City woke up, and voluntarily began the slow work of putting the pieces back together. People saw the Uprising and are making an effort to understand why it happened. People want to make changes realizing that the battles of the 1960's didn't necessarily finish the work. Baltimore is still divided, but the process of bridging that divide, and breaking it down has already begun.

God is calling each and every one of us, as students, members of religious and nonreligious communities, organizations, and residents of this amazing city; to step out of our comfort zones and bridge the gap to unite our city. Change can be scary, but it is unavoidable. Even as I continue to grieve the deaths of people I love, I am grateful for the life I continue to live. I am working to embrace change and grow because of it. I believe God will be present in our lives, even if it's not immediately clear or noticed. I believe that like Saul, it's up to us to get on our feet and embrace the changes in our lives.

You don't have to do it by yourself. People like Ananias will be there to help. God's challenge for each and every-one of us is to embrace our differences, embrace the change, and be the people who start to make a difference.