The Sixth Sunday of Easter May 26, 2019 “***A New Map"***

Psalm 67~ Acts 16:9-15 ~ John 14:23-29

I received a birthday card last year which pictured two doors on the front. One was half open with some balloons and confetti flying out. The caption read, *"They say when one door closes, another opens."*  Inside it said, *"Goodbye metabolism, hello senior discount*! It all happened so fast. It seems like only yesterday I was graduating from college with my brand spanking new political science degree and I was sure that I would be working at the White House. Has your life turned out just the way you planned it? If so, you are either very young or very unusual. For most of us, the old saying is more accurate: *"Life is what happens while you’re making other plans."*

As I mentioned last week … change is hard … whether the change is bad or good, an old, familiar way of life has passed away and a new way is being born. We carry who we are and what we’ve been with us, but we are no longer the same and we need to adjust to a new reality. We naturally try to hold on to the familiar … but this only deepens our grief and delays the inevitable because we cannot hold on to what no longer is.

The in-between time is the hardest. What *once was* is no more, but we do not *yet* know what *will be*. As we move into new, unfamiliar terrain, we feel lost for a while. A former parishioner described it this way when his wife died: *"I felt like a traveler whose land no longer corresponded to the map I held in my hand.*

Yes, now and then … whether we like it or not … we have to change our course. But what that really means is that we have to change *ourselves*. We could even say, we have to be “born again.” This is a universal human experience. But God has not left us without help for turning what may seem like a disaster at the moment into a new beginning that grows our souls. God is our guardian and guide. And while God is the midwife of our continual rebirth, it goes without saying that birth is a labor, especially the birth of our souls.

We have many words for this process … rebirth, renewal, reinvention, regeneration, re-orientation. "Paradigm shift" is a popular idiom. Last week we heard about Simon Peter’s paradigm shift, which led to the change in the early church so that all of us ethnics would be included, too. Today we heard how Paul had to change his plans, again through a vision from God.

Paul was on his second missionary journey, this time with Silas and Timothy. They were traveling around Asia Minor visiting and encouraging the churches that Paul and Barnabas had planted on their first journey. Then Paul planned to visit other territories in Asia Minor to plant new churches there, but he was blocked at every turn. The Book of Acts says it was the Spirit of God who prevented them, but we aren’t told exactly how. In any event, *why* would God prevent such a good thing?

Sometimes in our prayers we feel as if we are begging God for something so *obviously* right, that it seems God must be *perversely* withholding it from us. But this story wants to say that God guides those who trust in God … and are about God’s work in the world.

Blocked at every turn, Paul had a vision in the night. A man cried out: *"Come over to Macedonia and help us!"* Macedonia was the opposite direction from where he planned to go. I can imagine him telling God, "But what about these people? I want to go to these people! Those Europeans are crazy, Lord! A bunch of Greeks and Romans…what have I to do with them?" But what did Paul do? He went to Macedonia.

He went to Philippi, a Roman colony. In Acts, Paul usually went to the synagogue when he first came into a new town. But apparently there was no synagogue in Philippi. Paul, Silas, and Timothy went down to the river outside the city gate hoping to find a gathering of Jewish men. But instead of a gathering of men, they came upon a group of women who went down to the river to pray on the Sabbath. And I can just hear Paul … who is known to be a curmudgeon and to have some issues with women … say, "*Oh, no*, Lord! First you made me come way out here far away from my home base. And now you want me to work with *women*?"

Women didn’t count as equals to men in the synagogues in those days, or in all of the society. The church even became the primary conserver of that dominant social order. But the Book of Acts shows us the *creative*, *formative* days of the early church. Spiritual experience shapes theology, and already here at Philippi we see the sexist curmudgeon Paul forming a radical idea which he will write later in his letter to the Galatians: *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"* (Gal 3:28).

What did Paul do? He told these women about Jesus. In the audience was Lydia, a wealthy woman who dealt in the rich purple cloth only the wealthy or the royal could afford. And as Acts puts it, *"The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly."* She and her household were baptized. What irony! Lydia was the first recorded Christian convert in Europe … it turned out that the Macedonian man of Paul’s vision was a woman! Immediately she showed her new heart by generously offering her home and hospitality to Paul and his friends. The Philippian believers met in her home. And the Philippian church … above all others … would become Paul’s best support in his work around the Aegean Sea.

Now, I don’t want to suggest every time something happens that sends us spinning in a new direction, that it is God’s doing. I *don’t* believe God brings disasters on us to teach us a lesson … though God often warns us what the consequences of our behavior might be. And *always*, we can trust in God to guide us through our transitions. God will be with us, whatever hard changes we must accept … whatever new directions we must take. And with God’s help, whether the cause is bad or good, God will help us change ourselves with changing circumstances. God will grow our souls.

Remember what Jesus said, that night he gathered with his disciples and washed their feet … the night he instituted the Lord’s Supper … the night he was betrayed … the night before he was crucified? *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid"* (John 14:27). Talk about your life-changing experience. The cross was not what any of the disciples expected. The cross was not what Jesus preferred. And after their leader was executed as a criminal and buried, the disciples’ worlds were shattered. They knew their lives would never be the same. Everything they had hoped for… all their plans … their happy future story gone! They didn’t expect it. They thought it was all over! But they were right about one thing … their lives would never be the same! Thank God! Jesus rose from the dead, and they saw him, and their lives took on a glorious new adventure with God. Things aren’t always what they seem, especially when a good God is at work behind the scenes.

One of the most important questions we must ask ourselves in moments of transition is "What is it time for me to *let go of*?" But I would add, by our trust in God, that it is also a critical time to ask, "What is it time for me to *take hold of*? I have discovered that people who are focused on doing God’s work …who understand God has placed them here for a reason … who sense a purpose for living and an opportunity for caring … handle life’s changes better than those who are too focused on themselves. Jesus always turns our eyes outward to the world. Even when we are struggling and suffering, he leads us to forget about ourselves and care for those whose pain is even deeper than our own. The world isn’t about us. It’s about whom we can love.

So many pressures in our society today push us towards isolation from one another. But God made us to be interdependent. Jesus had his disciples. Paul traveled with Silas and Timothy. Almost all Paul’s letters speak of someone at his side. We need healthy circles of support to sustain us through our times of transition. We need to keep our family relationships strong. We can’t let some petty disagreement separate us from the people we need and who need us. God gave us the church to be a place of encouragement and a sheltering tree when the storms come. We can’t let minor misunderstandings separate us from a circle of prayer who will hold us up when we feel like falling down. When Jesus spoke of peace … he gave that important command … that above all else, we must love one another. Perhaps the peace Jesus promised to give us was not just deep peace within … but peace between us … his peace among us.

But I also think he *did* mean peace within. In his letter, years later to his beloved friends and supporters at the church at Philippi, Paul, (in difficult circumstances once again) wrote: *"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"* (Phil 4:6-7). The church at Philippi had taught him that! You see, whatever circumstances we are facing, whatever changes we endure, Christians share a fabulous “future story.” The book of Revelation speaks of a new heaven and a new earth. Jesus spoke of a place prepared. And as theologian Jurgen Moltmann puts it in his *Theology of Hope*: *"Jesus Christ is our future."*

So wherever you are on your life map today … whether you are in the groove easing on down the familiar pathways or wandering the wilderness of the uncharted territory of unexpected change … take heart. God is with you. And God will be with you. Trust in the Lord!

May we pray?

Life is too big for us, God. Time, the world, the great web of human interaction - these are all beyond our powers. And our plans get interrupted. Help us to do what lies within our power but trust the rest to you. Open our eyes to see you are with us and working in all of life’s circumstances. Open our hearts to change within as we go through these changes without that our souls might grow to be more and more loving like you. And guide us into life everlasting as we follow you in Jesus’ name. Amen.