

Extreme Makeover

1 Kings 19:1-15a

Luke 8:26-39

So I guess that's what you would call an extreme makeover. From raving mad to in his right mind. From roving through the graveyard, to sitting at the feet of Jesus. From shouting curses to preaching the Good News. From stark naked to fully clothed in Christ. From possessed by demons to possessing the Way, the Truth and the Life. Now that's quite a story. We don't really know this man's name. Oh, we know that he was occupied by Legion - legion of fear, legion of torment, legion of rage. Legion who exited in a rush into the pigs and over the cliff to their death far below. We do not know this man's name. But we do know that the man we meet at the beginning of this story in the gospel of Luke is not the same man we meet at the end. ...

This got me thinking. Thinking about those extreme makeovers... the people on TV who go through plastic surgery and skin abrasions and fitness routines and weight loss programs and new hairstyles and dental work ... and then after months of becoming a new creature, they present themselves to their loved ones in the Big Reveal... hmmm... wow...

Or what about those folks who live in the cramped quarters and struggle to get by on the welfare check with the seriously ill child and the overwhelming circumstances and then along comes this crew of bouncing smiling beautiful people who rip up their foundations and fill their home with ultra appliances and completely overturn their lives...and I always wonder... when the cameras go home ... how do they cope with the change?

Let us pray: God of this good day and every day... take our tidy, neat little lives and shake us up. Make us yours. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Conventional wisdom has it that people fear change. But Douglas Howardell, of the APA Business Consulting Group disagrees. He points out, quite rightly, that "most people like variety in their lives. They wear different clothes every day. They buy new clothes even though the old ones still fit, are not worn out and look just fine. Lots of folks rearrange their furniture just to introduce a little variety in their lives. Many people like to go to new places on vacation. One time it's up north to cooler climates, next it's south to some place warm. We like to go places that are different from where we live everyday. If we live in the city, we may be likely to vacation in the country. If we live in the country, we want to see the big city."¹ Yes, it would seem that change is stimulating and desirable...

So what's the problem? Why is it when we make a simple change like... um, let's say... how the bulletin looks... people say what's this? Oh, come on, I'm just teasing... I'm talking here about serious mind-altering change. I'm talking about being so successful at your job, like Elijah, that you have to run for your life. I'm talking about such an extreme makeover that the whole city comes out to get a good look at you. I'm talking about the kind of change where you step off the edge of all that is familiar and safe and steady beneath your feet, and step into the thin air of places you've never been before. When it comes to this kind of change, nothing is predictable. We lose our landmarks—down is up and up is down. All guarantees are invalidated. All bets are off. I'm talking here about serious change. And this kind of change... well, even Howardell admits that this kind of change is different. This kind of change is downright scary..... Why?

Because we perceive that it involves some kind of loss - of prestige, or power, or position; loss of our assumed identity or of our assigned role in the community; loss of our material goods, or maybe even our income; loss of our security or our routine. This kind of change brings new horizons, undiscovered vistas, unexplored territory. This kind of change makes us confront the unknown and it terrifies us.

Scott Peck concluded in his book "The Road Less Traveled," that the number one problem most people have in life is that they are finally unwilling to do the things that would bring true change to their lives. A psychologist can only bring a person so far. A point always comes when the person seeking help needs to make some decisions, make some changes, make some course corrections. But again and again in Peck's experience, people come up to that brink and then turn away. Why? Because they are afraid. People lack the courage to do what needs doing. It costs too much. It feels too risky. Transformation always looks daunting. Sometimes, even the transformation brought about by the gospel looks daunting.

Today in scripture we encounter two men who both confronted the strange and demanding territory of the unknown. In the Old Testament we meet Elijah. He heard God's call to him and he responded in full faith. God used him to speak holy truth to unholy power and it worked! The fire of God leapt down from heaven and devoured the prophets of Baal and vindicated Elijah's faithful preaching. He obeyed God by confronting evil and idolatry and the abuse of power. But no one thanked him. In fact, he earned the dire wrath of Queen Jezebel. So now he's running for his life into the wilderness.

He's scared to death, and full of doubt, and plumb worn out, and all he wants to do is lie down under a tree or in a cave or anywhere he can find some peace but God refuses to leave him be and shakes him with earthquakes and fires and tornadoes and silence..... and then the dreaded question—What are you doing here, Elijah? Step on out into Unknown Territory! I have more for you to do!

And then in the Gospel we encounter a man who underwent radical change—a most astounding and vivid extreme form of makeover. For most of his life, he'd been the certified town lunatic. Runnin' naked and wild-eyed through the tombstones and screaming obscenities at anyone who passed by. But when he met Jesus all that tormented him and held him in submission fled from him and he became literally a new creation in Christ...and there he was clothed and in his right mind and ready to follow Jesus anywhere.

You would think the townsfolk would have been grateful, and maybe even come out to thank Jesus for finally liberating their town from the nutjob who used to terrify the neighborhood, but no! This change was so huge that it was the townspeople who were terrified - for up 'til then they had been content to know where evil was, to keep it isolated and tolerated. But now the power of almighty God is on the loose, and all the pigs they kept for livestock are in the drink, and everything they thought they could manage was topsy turvy. Instead they say, What in the world will God do next in our community? Get out of here, Jesus! Go! And don't come back!

If we hear this story as faithful disciples, we can shake our heads at their inability to receive and embrace the Good News. But, if we're truthful, perhaps we can admit that sometimes we are those townspeople: When facing big changes that threaten to upend how we understand ourselves we too may say Jesus—Get out of here! The system is working fine, thank you. May not be perfect, but we have found a way to get by, so please leave us alone. Do not threaten our sense of management. Do not remove our excuses for why things must be the way they are. We would rather deal with the known problem in the cemetery than unleash this power that we don't understand. In the face of these unpredictable changes, let's just clamp down and make sure everything is planned for and controlled and organized and predictable. For heaven's sake, let's not leave any room for the Holy Spirit to go upending the apple cart!

Well folks, if you're feeling comfortable and satisfied, you had better brace yourselves. When we invite Jesus into our lives, we sign up for a dangerous encounter, for Jesus speaks transformation to the status quo. As the old saying goes, God loves us just the way we are and too much to leave us that way! And even though we know—we as Christians have heard this a million times—that we can trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus than to trust and obey—the truth is that any power that can't be managed or calculated is frightening. If we open ourselves to it, if we really yield to God's power, what might happen to our lives, to our families, to our church, to our community? Perhaps it is better to face the devil we know than the amazing, provocative, demanding, challenging, glorious God who undoubtedly will call us into territory we don't know so well.

Yes, change is scary. But our lives are full of change. Nothing ever stays the same ...ask Evelyn Millar, who celebrates her 100th birthday today. I bet she's seen a lot of change. Ask Elijah, who like the Israelites, learned the hard way that God is there through all the changes that life brings...through the earthquake, through the fire, through the wind, through those times when it seems as though nothing is happening at all... when down seems up and up seems down, when you can't recognize your surroundings anymore, when you can't recognize your self anymore...God is at work, ever about making something new. Turning Elijah from fugitive to prophet; turning the tormented man from demoniac to disciple; turning you... turning me ... turning this congregation... beckoning us all forward into the ministries God calls and equips us to fulfill.

It was C. S. Lewis who said: we think inviting Jesus into our hearts is like inviting an interior decorator to put up some new curtains and a fresh coat of paint, but before you know it, he's knocking out walls, tearing up floorboards, and just generally redesigning the whole building. We think running with God is like training a horse to run a bit faster whereas in reality what God really wants to do for the horse is to outfit it with wings and teach it to fly. Run with Jesus, my friends, open your lives to the insistent power of the Holy Spirit and you will be transformed by the renewing of your minds, you will be changed from one degree of glory to another, you will be pushed out of your cave like Elijah, you will be commissioned like our friend from Garasene. That's what our Christian journey is all about... extreme makeover indeed!

¹Douglas Howardell. *Overcoming People's Fear of Change*. [<http://www.theacagroup.com/index.htm>] June 23, 2007.

²James T. Moor. *When Jesus Comes to Visit*. Day 1.