

## CHANGE AND CHOICE

Isaiah 40: 1-5; Luke 3: 1-6

Doris needed a change. Life had become so predictable... boring, in fact. Her husband was immersed in his work all the time and whenever he was home he just sat in front of the TV or in front of his computer screen. They had no children. Doris had settled into her 9-5 job and after 20 years she could do it with her eyes closed. Her mind wandered on travel to exotic places, meeting someone spontaneously and clandestinely who would sweep her off her feet. The more dangerous and out there her day dreams, the more exciting they were. Doris needed some real change in her life.

Samantha, on the other hand, had all the change she could handle and more. Samantha was a colleague of Doris, but unlike Doris, she loved the predictability and routine of her job. It was the one thing stable in her life. Samantha had been through a messy divorce, and things were still being worked out years later. Her son still blamed her for it all, and even though she and her son were the closest of friends now that he was older, there was still a residue of blame and shame between them. Samantha had also had a bout with cancer, and even though the disease was in remission at present, the future was anything but certain. Finally, her son had just told her that he had found his dream job. The only problem was that he would have to move to the other side of the world. Samantha tried to share her son's excitement, but she was also sad and afraid, afraid of living a new kind of loneliness. A lot of Samantha's friends were couple friends and mutual family friends. Without a husband and now, an empty nest, things would be changing for her yet again. How could she find some peace and some stable longer-term connection with others?

Change... it's happening all the time whether we choose it or not. From our bodies, to our minds, to our inner emotional world, change is happening to us and around us all the time. Change is also something too often not in our control. From experiences and situations, to changing circumstances and people who come in and go out of our lives, change happens whether we like it or not, choose it or not.

Too often the factors that cause change in our personal lives are much bigger than us. Think about climate change and all the ways it can affect people anywhere in the world – from forest fires, to floods, to biodiversity. Think about the deranged actions of individuals or groups who act out of hate or racist prejudice or mental health problems. We think of the terrible van attack along Yonge street earlier this year... Our lives can be changed in an instant and it has nothing to do with our choices one way or another. Being at the wrong place at the wrong time is something we can only know when we're caught in it, and sometimes, it's too late to change anything once we're in the situation. We can lose our jobs

– Think about all those workers at GM in Oshawa and related industries. We can lose our health and receive a terrible diagnosis on any given day. We are all so vulnerable to change and much of this change we do not choose.

So then, what wisdom can we find to help us navigate and negotiate change in our lives? Let us ponder our scripture readings for some ancient wisdom and revelation spoken into our modern lives.

Our Old Testament reading comes from the prophet Isaiah. Our reading represents a new chapter in the prophet's message from God. Up to now, the focus of his prophecies has been on how Israel's sufferings at the hands of oppressive powers are a consequence of bad choices Israel has made. If you play with fire you're going to get burned. If you try to make friends with the devil and compromise higher values, truth and justice because you're afraid and you lack faith in what other possibilities can open up for you if you refuse to compromise your integrity... if you do that, you're going to fall into a pit. And so, Israel is in a pit and Israel must claim a chunk of the blame as a people. But the problem with blame is: the more you blame yourself, the deeper you sink in the pit and the longer you remain stuck. So how do you find a way out?

The prophet is speaking a fresh word of hope. A new day is possible. A new day is coming. Yet, a new day cannot come unless Israel is able to develop some faith and hope that good things can come in spite of the mistakes of the past. Faith and hope open up possibilities and motivate creative thinking, courage and action. Without faith and hope in what God can do when we get activated, nothing will happen and we will remain stuck in a dead end. Change may have brought bad stuff our way. But unless we are motivated by faith and hope to choose constructive change in response, we will remain victims rather than actors empowered to rise up to a new day and a new way.

The prophet is like a motivational coach here, but the kind of coach who wants to draw out a more profound and spiritually reflected response from his people. Faith and hope are not just in yourself. To open up that imaginative, spiritual side of your brain where faith and hope live, you have to open up to sources of power and renewal beyond you. God is that transcendent source of power and renewal seeking to penetrate us and work in and through us so that we rise up to new motivation in acting and engaging with life, with others and with new possibilities. Whether we choose to accept a new situation or change it in some way, this is a choice we must make in the face of change that has come into our lives. We need faith and hope to choose positively and well.

And so, how alive is faith and hope in you at this time of your life? What change for good can you be a part of in your life and in the lives of others? What imaginative, spiritual sources of

empowerment beyond you do you tap into to renew your faith and hope again and again when change throws curve ball after curve ball your way?

And this brings us to our gospel lesson. The prophet's words are now inserted into our gospel reading as a prophecy about John the Baptist. Like Isaiah centuries before him, John is now proclaiming a similar call to faith and hope to his generation. But John uses different words, because he is speaking to different people hundreds of years later. Every generation, every context, every new situation requires new ways of communicating faith and hope. We're told that John proclaims "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Those who choose to be baptised by John are choosing to commit to change in their lives. That's what repentance means – change. Repentance means that you want to change your life in a meaningful, impactful way. Forgiveness of sins means that the mistakes of your past can be left behind, surrendered, given over to God. God who is transcendent possibility, will liberate you from the weight of the past, so that you can engage life and choose positive and life-giving directions for your life now and into the future. A new day is coming and it's good news... It's gospel.

But we need to prepare for this new day of positive change. For John, the new day is coming through God's transforming power channeled through a concrete human being who will reignite faith and hope for those of us ready to follow him. We know this human embodiment of the divine as Jesus. Jesus is coming as a child, a saviour, a healer, a transformer and more. He can be everything our spiritual brain imagines and everything our hearts are prepared to believe in and hope for.

So what about you and me? What are we prepared to believe in and hope for? Do we engage change or are we simply the victim of change? Do we have a lively faith and hope that lives inside us, and if so, where does this faith and hope come from?

Ok. Preacher. You've said a lot and asked a lot. What can it look like in real life when the transforming possibilities of faith and hope come alive in the choices we can make?

Here's a concrete example. Andy Clutton and Ghulam Momand are friends. In 2012, Momand and his family came to Canada from Afghanistan and settled in downtown Hamilton. This is an area where many refugees live. Clutton comes from a family who have been Canadian for generations. He is also part of a Christian group called 'Move In.' Members of this group commit to moving into low-income, high-density communities with large newcomer populations to live out their Christian call. Their mission is to express welcome and hospitality by providing all kinds of help and support. Clutton and Momand could not be more different on the surface. Clutton is 29, born and raised in Canada and a Christian. Momand is 65, Muslim and a recent arrival from Afghanistan. And yet the two have become

close friends, sharing tea and a common devotion to medicine – Momand was a village doctor in Afghanistan and Clutton is a palliative-care nurse.

But the challenge of change and the call to follow Christ took on a whole new twist when doctors discovered Momand needed a new kidney, otherwise he would die. Momand and his family sought help from Clutton to get the word out to the wider community. They needed a suitable donor. But as Clutton got involved in this project, he also felt a personal tug of conviction. Could God be calling him to volunteer as a donor? Momand was not only a friend. He was a child of God.

And so, after lots of prayer and discussion with his wife and family, and after going through testing, Clutton was found to be a good candidate. Momand could not believe it. His family could not believe it. The wider Christian and Muslim communities could not believe it. And yet, for them, this was clearly bigger than a simple human choice. In Clutton's own words: it was "a spiritual conviction" to live like Jesus. He also says that it had to be a lot more than "just some cool thing to do." With a wife and young children and knowing that it would be a drawn out process with some risks, without a deeper conviction that God was opening these doors, he would have given up a long time ago. But he and Momand had become more than friends. They and their families were praying for each other. This deeper connection and respective faiths brought them together, leading to this momentous choice. Disease and hardship was a change that came upon them. How they chose to respond: with friendship, compassion, commitment and some sacrifice, opened up totally new doors. And so, it happened. The surgery happened and as of last month, both Momand and Clutton are recovering well.

And this brings it all back to us right here and right now. We may not all be called to donate a kidney. But we are all challenged to dig deeper into ourselves and ponder not only the change that is happening to us and around us, but the change we ourselves want to become. How will faith and hope stir us and convict us this advent season and this Christmas? We have all witnessed a baptism today. Charlotte's parents have chosen to have her baptised because they believe that besides all the ways they will provide for Charlotte to make good choices in the face of all the changes that will come her way as she grows, she also needs transcendent spiritual resources: God above her, Christ beside her and the Spirit within her. Spiritual resources may not be as tangible as other things in our lives, but that doesn't make them any less necessary or powerful. In fact, considering examples like Andy Clutton, spiritual resources sometimes become the central factor in inspiring and empowering our life-choices and the development of positivity and resilience in us.

May each of us find some new faith, hope and love this advent season. And may we find a special kind of courage to choose to listen for the call of God in our lives; Amen.