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“What If All My Decisions Are Fear-Based?”  
The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (02/11/2024, Last Sunday after the Epiphany)

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Let us pray. Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

One of the other changes you will see as we enter the season of lent is that improvisational segue from the gospel to the sermon that Eugene does will go away.

There will be more silence and reflection in our services, but if you don't know what Eugene is doing there is trying to interpret musically the gospel passage you just heard.

So that sort of exultant, exuberant, yet tinged with fear, musical piece you just had was the way that Jesus reveals himself on the mountain. We're going to get to that.

So just do what you can to just let him know how much you appreciate him, especially as we enter. Not right now. Not now. Okay. All right. I want to talk about lent. I want to talk about where we're headed. But first I want to talk about the first church where I served as an ordained minister in Western Pennsylvania. And at that church, like pretty much all Episcopal churches, there is an early service that features no music and it's about 15 people that attend.

And this church had one of those as we do, but this service had something unique and odd.

And I noticed it the first Sunday that I was there because in that service, the passing of the piece took place in the first 90 seconds of the service. So the passing of this piece is this

thing that will happen in this service, but after the confession, it's sort of in the middle.

Theologically what's happening is that we confess our sins. We hear we're forgiven and we are at peace with God so we can now extend that peace to those around us. And so we force that through a socially awkward moment where we ask you to pass the peace. You turn to the person here, the peace with you, the peace with you, and then you sit down and you thank God that's over. But that was introduced in the 1979 prayer book that read book in front of you was where that first began to be a practice in our churches. And before that time, it was not done. It was not included in the service. You didn't have to talk to anyone. It was glorious. In this church though, while they had the passing of the peace, they put it at the beginning. The minister would have begun with the opening prayers that you heard Garrett say. And then right after that first kind of the Lord be with you and all, you know, blessed be God, Father's Holy Spirit. And then the peace the Lord be always with you and also with you. And then people would shake hands and then continue with the scripture readings. So it was the very beginning. And so I began asking, what in the world is going on? How did you move this to the beginning and the service? And why? And no one knew, well, we've just always done it that way. So I asked more and I found kind of a wise and elder of the church and said, well, there was in the late 1970s a member of this church who had been here a long time and apparently had amassed a great deal of power and influence in the congregation. And this person with a white, hot hatred hated the passing of the peace. And when that began to be introduced into the service in the trial prayer books in the mid 1970s, this person just stopped coming to church. And so the compromise that was reached was that this person who attended that early service would wait in the narthex in the back of the church. And they moved the peace to the very beginning of the service. And this person would stand in the back, wait till it was over and then take his seat at his reserved pew. I mean, I think that's what Jesus would do. That's the kind of spirit one wants among the body of Christ. That's probably the most extreme example of the resistance to change in church, but it is not uncommon. And it's not uncommon in life that we resist change. There

is, I think,  
a situation in everybody in this room probably right now is either  
responding to an ongoing change  
in denial about a change that's coming, maybe actively avoiding it,  
or maybe you are sort of girding your loins, emotionally  
psychologically preparing for a change  
that you know is coming, whether you like it or not. I think the way  
people respond to aging  
it demonstrates which are, you know, are you someone who embraces it  
or you're someone who fights  
it with every fiber in your being? Are you in total denial about it as  
you ride your Harley-Davidson,  
you know, without a helmet, a post-retirement, not a good idea in  
denial about change.  
If that hits close to home, I'm sorry. People are always resisting or  
responding to or dealing with  
change. And, you know, Bowie in 1971 told us to turn and face the  
strange, and that song ch-ch-ch-ch-changes.  
And yet, despite Ziggy's stardust, I mean, what greater source of  
wisdom could you want?  
Despite him telling us to turn and face the strange and brace the  
change, we resist. We resist,  
we deny, but I get it. I do this too, because change, embracing  
uncertainty, I am not here for that.  
I like knowing what my day is going to be like, I like knowing what my  
year is going to be like,  
I like knowing kind of what the path my life is on is going to be, and  
I resist change as much as  
the next person. And yet this morning we see that happening in all of  
our scripture passages.  
We see in the book of Isaiah, chapter 40, Elijah, the prophet, is  
passing the torch. He's  
cleaning out his office, he's moving on to his next gig, and Elijah,  
his successor, is like, don't go,  
don't go. I'll stay with you. I'll don't go. Second Corinthians 4,  
Paul is writing to the early  
Christian community in the first century, and those folks are all  
resisting the change that is  
coming down the pike. There are people competing with Paul because  
Paul is preaching a message that  
is new and they don't like it and they want to resist it. Now I want  
to talk about Mark 9, the  
gospel passage you heard read. It's always the reading on the last  
Sunday before we enter the  
season of Lent, and you just sung about it in the hymn before the  
gospel reading. It's this  
transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop. I want to talk about that  
and say, I think there are  
two keys that are in this passage may help. At least they help me as I  
think about change, and I hope

they help you. So in this passage, Mark chapter 9, Jesus takes his inner circle, Peter, James, and John up onto Mount Carmel, this sort of hill outside of Jerusalem you could go there today, and on that mountain he is transfigured. He goes from a relatively non-descript Jewish peasant to emanating light, glowing so brightly, and Elijah and Moses appear next to him. They're talking with him, these Old Testament figures, and Peter, James, and John are terrified. They fall down, and then Peter says this interesting thing. He says, let's stay here. Let me build you some shelters. Let's get some facilities here so we can keep this moment going and not have to end it. Because this is what Peter has been wanting all along, Jesus to really reveal his power, Jesus to reign as king, Jesus to be the boss of all the bosses, and to set everything right, to get rid of the Romans, to make sure that the world is all fixed and perfect, and so now Jesus is shining and glorious, and finally he's going to do the thing that we've all been waiting for him to do, we've arrived. No more suffering walking through the dusty streets and lanes of Galilee, and depending on others for our food, and being under the oppressive heel of the Romans. No more of all that we have arrived, and I want to stay here, and I don't want anything to change, so we'll keep this permanent. We'll make this a permanent arrangement, but Jesus does not. He does not want to stay there. He doesn't want to make it a permanent arrangement. He looks like he doesn't want to fix everything. He does this amazing thing. He returns to what he looked like before, and he goes back down the mountain. He doesn't stay. He embraces change. He doesn't cling to comfort. He goes down into what will be assuredly a time of suffering, and he knows it will lead to his death. So why doesn't Jesus stay in the comfortable? Why doesn't he stay in the power? Why doesn't he stay in the glory? Why doesn't he stay in this mountaintop experience? Why does he embrace this change and go down the mountain? The reason I think most people resist change is because they are afraid. I think fear is at the root of it. Do you guys know what Biola is? Biola was founded as the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, and that didn't, I guess, it didn't do well in focus groups, so they changed the name, just Biola, just the acronym, and it's a Christian school in Southern

California,  
and there is a band that came out of that college called the Cold War Kids, and I bring that up only to say that the Cold War Kids have a lyric in a song, which to me gets at what most people, even if they're not vocalizing, it's true about them. He says, what if all my decisions are fear-based? Either avoiding some negative consequence or resisting some sort of difficult thing, what if all my decisions are fear-based? And I think fear is an extremely powerful motivator. And it's usually the reason we resist change. I mean, what if something bad happens? What if you take the relationship to the next level and you end up getting your heart broken? What if you take the job, and it turns out that your co-workers are really difficult, and it doesn't turn out the way, well, what if you move to a city and you don't make any new friends? What if you come to work at St. Albany? Your boss is so difficult. What if? What if? I know. What if? What if something bad happens? This is the thing. What if you buy your house and the values plummet? What if you think and the interest rates ride? What if, what if, what if, what if all these things? What if all your decisions are fear-based? But wildly, sort of crazily, Jesus embraces change. In John 1 John chapter 4, there's a famous verse. Perfect love drives out all fear. I think Jesus knew this. I think he was able to embrace change because of two loves. The fact that he himself is loved. Jesus hears God, the Father, say, one thing on the mountain. This is my son, the beloved. This is my son, the beloved. And I think this is the source of his ability to embrace change. If you know you are loved by God, and hopefully that's mediated to you through a real human person in your life, it's made real to you, then one is often able to embrace change. And the second thing for Jesus, obviously, he loves his disciples. He loves you. If he stayed on the mountain, there's no cross, there's no resurrection. There's no empty tomb. There's no eternal life. There's no atonement for sins and the restoration of all things. None of that if he stays up there. He himself knows he's loved and he himself loves you. And this is what then is able to drive his embrace of change. These two loves. And so for you, how does this help you? Well, I hope that you hear the fact that you are loved. And so that thing you're afraid of, the thing you're

resisting,  
know that you're loved. And God is not waiting to drop the other shoe.  
The other thing I would say  
is the fact that Jesus leaves the mountain top and goes down into the  
valley and goes into a place  
of suffering, into a dark and hard place. For you, as you're thinking  
about change, your worry is  
that it will be, if you embrace this change, it will be a dark and  
hard place. In some way,  
that's the fear. Jesus going down the mountain to me shows that  
whatever dark and hard place,  
even if you find yourself in that place, Christ is there. And this is  
what Lent is about as we enter  
this time of year. It's a time where we remember that Jesus goes into  
the wilderness and if you find  
yourself in the wilderness, Jesus is there. So what have we said? So  
that we fear change.  
What if all the bad things happen? Jesus is rather remarkably able to  
embrace change,  
because he himself knows he's loved and he himself loves. And what I  
want for you to hear,  
and I hope this helps, is one that you are loved and whatever place,  
difficult, hard, dark place,  
you may find yourself. Christ is there. God does love you. He's not  
waiting to drop the other  
shoe or to pull the rug out from under you. Jesus Christ does not stay  
on the comfortable  
mountain in his power and glory, but instead goes to the cross for  
you. This is the love of God  
for you. And all your decisions, which are fear-based, I encourage you  
to see them in the light of this  
one who loves you and do not stay in the comfortable but embrace  
change for you. Let us pray.  
Almighty God, we are afraid and change is hard. Help us grant that we  
would know  
and dare to believe that you love us in all the changes and chances of  
this life. We pray  
this in Christ's name. Amen.