

“Moving Forward Through Uncertainty”

A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Alison Miller

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I want to share one of my favorite parables about change. It’s a Sufi tale about a stream. It is told in many ways, of which this is one:

“High in a far-off mountain, a little spring sprang from a hidden source. It flowed down the mountain over all different kinds of terrain, sometimes leaping and bubbling, sometimes drifting lazily or going underground. But, it was never stopped by any obstacle that might have gotten in its way, until one day it reached the edge of a vast desert.

“Just one more step,” it said, “one more obstacle. Nothing has ever stopped me from flowing. I will overcome this obstacle too.”

So the stream flung itself at the desert. But, each time it did so its waters simply disappeared, vanishing into nothingness, swallowed up by the dry hot sand. But, if it was its destiny to cross that desert, it would surely find a way.

“The wind can cross the desert,” it declared, “and so can the stream! I know I must cross this desert, but every time I try, the sand swallows me up! No matter how hard I fling myself at the desert, I don’t get any further!”

“You won’t be able to cross the desert using the old ways,” said the desert, “I am not like a boulder or a tree or a rock ledge. It is no use hurling yourself at the desert like that. You will never cross the sand like this, you will simply disappear or turn into marshland. You must trust the wind to carry you across the desert. You must let yourself be carried.”

“How can the wind carry me across the desert?” asked the stream.

“You must let yourself be absorbed into the wind, and then the wind will carry you.”

“No!” cried the stream. “I am a stream with a nature and identity of my own. I don’t want to lose myself by being absorbed into the wind.”

“That’s what the wind does. Trust me, and trust the wind. If you let yourself be absorbed by the wind, it will carry you across the desert and let you fall again on the other side to be a stream again.”

“But I won’t be the same stream I am now. I won’t be this particular stream.”

The desert understood the dilemma, but it also understood the mystery.

“You’re right,” said the desert.

“I am?”

“You won’t be the same stream you are now if you fling yourself into the sand and turn into a marsh. Let the wind carry you across the desert, and the real you, the real heart of you, the essence of everything you truly are, will be born again on the other side to flow a new course, to be a river that you can’t even imagine from where you are standing now.”

So the stream thought for a long while, but deep in its heart it had a memory of a wind that could be trusted and a horizon that was always out of reach but was always a new beginning. So the stream took a deep breath and surrendered itself to the power of the wind. and the wind took the vapor of the stream in strong and loving arms and took it high above the desert, far beyond the horizon, and let it fall again softly at the top of a new mountain, and the stream began to understand who it really was, and what it meant to be a stream.”

Change. It is the one constant. Yet, we resist it. Perhaps, that is because it so often accompanied by loss. As a pastor, I have learned that even through positive changes we experience grief. When we are changed by an experience, we are no longer the same.

We mourn the identity of who we were before the change, even if we also eagerly embrace the new possibilities of who we are becoming. When a youth leaves the home of their childhood, they may relish the arrival to the next place and all that waits for them there. Yet, they will undoubtedly also miss their room, their family, their favorite recipes and more. When people are becoming parents, they may be very excited to welcome their child into the world. However, they may also want to experience some of their favorite pastimes one last time before the baby is born

knowing it will be different and they will be different the next time. When people share that they are retiring, I try to remember to take a breath before offering congratulations knowing that their heart may be processing grief at the moment, even if they wanted to retire.

Some changes are wanted. Some are delightful and expected, or unexpected. Some are unwanted, but come all the same. Some are a mixed bag as they say. Some are minor and fairly quick. Some are so major, that we wonder will we ever get our bearings again. Many significant changes are a long time in formation, and we may spend a fair amount of time in a liminal, emerging space.

In the summer of 2000, I received my first stole from the young adult & campus ministry group I was leading in New York. It was actually a scarf with chalices on it, but they made it clear when they put it on my shoulders that they meant it as a stole – and as a recognition that they saw me that way. I'm glad it was a scarf because according to custom you're not supposed to wear a stole until ordination, so I could wear it without offending any future colleagues, and be reminded of where I was heading and how I was changing. It would take three years of divinity school, followed by a rotation as a hospital chaplain, followed by one year as a full-time intern, plus a couple months into a professional ministry until I was ordained as a minister in our tradition.

We are living through a time of emergence in the wake of an experience none of us wanted. We have lived through a collective trauma, the pandemic, and we are different than we were before whether or not we wished to change. We certainly didn't wish to be changed by experiencing so much loss – millions of souls.

Some of us over the last couple of years, like Marcia, who bravely shared her story with us earlier, have also experienced personal changes with significant losses that we didn't want either. We live in these marvelous bodies filled and are filled with mind and spirit. These lead to the miracle of being human, which includes the ability to think, to feel, to love, to create art, to make a difference, to engineer wonders, and to care for the next generation. But, these bodies are also finite and flawed – pain and illness can arise and one day our hearts will cease to beat. We don't know when that will happen or how far we will have come. All we know is that we have this moment in this room and online here together. The rest is uncertain.

That, of course, is what paradoxically makes the here and the now of living so precious. We don't have forever. Change is the only constant. Like the water in the

stream, our lives involve constant transformation, constant endings and new beginnings.

Uncertainty and change brings grief, but it also offers grace. When we are sad, when we are feeling despair, there is the possibility of change. Our minds and spirits can make the move from hopelessness to healing to joy. I treasure the story of a man, we'll call him John, who was hospitalized, who was diagnosed as bipolar, who was struggling with whether or not it was worth it to survive another day, who did survive. Who experienced a lessening of the pain and the creeping in of a will to thrive. Who emerged from that place and over the next several years became a cognitive behavioral therapist companioning others on the journey to quench their psychological pain.

Certainty isn't always all it's cracked up to be. Thank goodness people outlive expectations, surprise even themselves at times, and defy odds. Thank goodness everything isn't known. These have yielded the gifts of creativity, curiosity, and a drive to change in ways that lead to something better for us and for others too.

As well-known Unitarian minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote: "In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred. Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit... No truth so sublime but it may be trivial to-morrow in the light of new thoughts. People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them... Life is a series of surprises."

Recognizing that change and novelty are a part of what make life worth living, we must also figure out how to face the encounters with uncertainty and change, which make us doubt that truth – the changes we don't want and are companioned by pain, isolation, and desolation. How do we move forward, how do we lean into those desert times, when our thirst is seemingly endless?

There are many who have suffered greatly in this period we are moving through – the pandemic has revealed the fragility of our health, and it has also revealed the pain of people on the margins or on the frontlines bearing the brunt of change – people who are more vulnerable because of the injustices of unfettered capitalism, refusing to act to stem the tide of climate change, and racism and other oppressions.

Many people have cried out, "When, Oh Lord, will things return to normal? I long for the ways life used to be when we were together." While others have cried,

“When, Oh Lord, will the revolution be complete? Don’t simply take us back, take us forward to the other side, another side, where we will finally be together.”

We are emerging from this time, which will continue to be a process. 5 – 11 year olds now finally have access to the vaccine, and yet, the Morris School District High School just closed and went virtual again for ten days because of rising rates.

I invite you to honor the liminal time we find ourselves in both collectively and individually. The word ‘liminal’ comes from the Latin *limen*, which means threshold. We are neither in the place we were before, nor are we yet in the place we will be. We are at the threshold of the doorway to change.

In order to move forward, we must accept that change is a part of life, and that means being willing to move through the steps of grief who are our companions through change. Just to remind you what they are as described by Elizabeth Kubler Ross:

denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance

We don’t move through these linearly we will go back and forth and around that threshold for a while – perhaps it is better thought of as a hallway that we can move around between two places or identities.

When we want to simply get back to normal without examining all we have learned through this experience without having to behave or be different. That sounds a lot like denial.

When we said at the beginning that we would only have to separate from one another two months – that sounded a lot like bargaining.

I want to parse anger, depression, and acceptance together for today. We experience anger and sadness about the losses we cannot change – time and perspective are a balm for that wound. Life always has a beginning and an end. Just because a life was cut short doesn’t mean, it didn’t have great purpose and meaning, or that those people and the love they gave away won’t be the way we glimpse eternity...

The pandemic has had another experience of anger, sadness, and I would argue for non-acceptance and remaining unsettled in this case. Injustice is a cause of righteous anger and sadness about losses that we can do something about going forward. Acceptance is about what we cannot change. In this case, we are called to

remain unsettled and to embrace the uncertainty of building new ways and better ways that bring more abundant love and life into being.

In the parable of the stream, when it had the courage to release the grief and let go of part of what had been normal, it was able to transform and ultimately become a river... a river of streams that came together to become something more than any one of them had been on their own carrying with them currents of life more abundant than they could have imagined before.

It took the collective streams time to cross the long threshold of the desert. But by allowing themselves to be changed by what they learned and what they lost and by being open to what could emerge on the other side, they were transformed.

Friends, here we are, like water, moving through the wind in desert. We are changing in ways that we don't fully understand as individuals, as a congregation, as a wider community of local counties and nations around the globe. Let us use this time wisely – to mourn and let go, and to be opened by curiosity and creativity and courage – to land on the other side and to practice a way of being human that is teeming with life, that allows us to see that our fates are intertwined with others winding towards the sea.

I think this time of grief and isolation has allowed us to be together in ways we never have quite been before or at least in recent history. What we need now is to move forward on the path of healing knowing that while we will never be the same, if we embrace our unsettled nature as Emerson invites us to do, we may be able to become more connected than we ever were before – more connected to love, to justice, to life. May it be so.