

Stanford Memorial Church
March 4, 2012

Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 17.1-7, 15-16
Gospel Lesson: Mark 8.31-38

TRANSITION TIME
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Both of our scripture lessons for today have one thing in common: each may be described as a life-transforming transition story. On a somewhat simplistic level, we could say that every day we are involved in thousands of transitional stories, from a very primary level to highly complex, significant watershed moments in our lives. On the primary level, the great majority of our transitional behaviors—perhaps as much as 80 to 90%—are unconscious. In recent years studies in the neurosciences field have determined that part of our brain acts on a very primitive, animal level, which is devoted to our survival. In examining animal behavior, for example, it is now generally known that every animal behaves as if it is surrounded by a kind of invisible boundary line. When a strange animal starts to cross that line, a largely unconscious “fight or flight” response takes over, and the animal either takes off in flight or it engages in a “fight” with the most aggressive action it can muster. About 30 years ago I had a most memorial experience of this largely unconscious, self-survival instinct taking over. It was a lovely, sunny Sunday morning, and I was light-heartedly walking along a rather busy street in San Francisco, thinking about the worship service which I would soon be helping to lead. Seemingly out of nowhere, a man, who had been totally out of my awareness until that instant, was standing directly in front of me—pointing a pistol at my chest, which, needless to say, shattered my light-hearted reverie. I believe he said something about giving him my wallet. What engaged my attention most clearly, however, in addition to the pistol pointing at me, was his request that we go around the corner to a quieter street. At that moment, an internal voice said to me, “if he shoots me I have a better chance of survival here on this busy street than I would have on the quieter side street.” Then some seemingly invisible power within me took over, and I found myself grabbing the barrel of the pistol. And, as I happened to have the leverage, I took it away from him and he took off running. If someone asked me why or how I did it, as the police later did, I had to say, “I don’t know, it was like some survival mechanism within me took over.”

Of course each day we are involved in countless unconscious behaviours, very few of which, thank goodness, are as dramatic as my story of almost being robbed. They sort of automatically fall into place as we wake up each day, take a shower, decide what to wear, what to eat, drive on the right wide of the road—and so forth. Throughout the day, however, we will be making a host of more conscious choices, ranging from deciding whether to order a burgundy cherry or chocolate mint ice cream cone to the more complex transitions in which we much more consciously draw on our knowledge and experience in dealing with such issues as completing a work assignment, deciding to buy a new car, or seeking new employment—and so forth.

Now we are getting to the other end of the transition continuum. These are the deep existential transitions which will alter our lives as well as the lives of those about us. These are the critical transitions that confronted Abraham in the Old Testament lesson as well as the one Jesus addressed in the Gospel lesson from Mark. They call to mind Robert Frost's famous poem,

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

It is a transition time that will impact their entire being: their family and friends, a reordering of their priorities, and the allocation of their resources. Such was the situation with the man introduced to us as Abram who felt called by God to a transforming time of transition in his life. Up until this moment, he had, to all outward purposes, lived a fairly successful life, with but one very distressing exception: he had no children. But God calls him to a significant time of transition, saying to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous" (Genesis 17.2). To underscore the significance of this time of transition, God declares their names will be changed. Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai is renamed Sarah. In effect, the old has passed away and the change in their names reflects a transformation in their identity and being. According to the biblical account, Abraham was ninety-one years old at the time. But, when we are also informed that Methuselah lived to be one hundred and eighty-seven years, then we might say that Abraham was in his mid-life transition. Regardless of his age, however, it was an incredible time of transition for both Abraham and Sarah. The blessing so richly promised appeared to defy every of being realized. After all their years of marriage they still did not have a son. To be sure, Sarah, in order not to shame her husband had suggested that he have a child with her maid, Hagar,—which he did. Interestingly enough, in the Muslim tradition Hagar is not a handmaiden to Sarah; rather she is identified as Abraham's first wife and the child she bore, Ishmael, is considered Abraham's first son. Returning to the Jewish/Christian tradition, Sarah, now had to live with the shame and anger of her maid having the son that Abraham craved for so many years, while she remained childless. Eventually they do have a son, Isaac. Their hearts burst with joy but it was short-lived and sorely tested when God once again calls Abraham, and instructs him to sacrifice the young Isaac on a nearby mountain top. But, miracle of miracles, as the very last moment an angel of God intervenes and a momentous shift occurs in the history of religion. In effect, the God we worship is a God of love and compassion. Not a God to be placated with human sacrifices, but rather a God who intercedes to save life.

The second time-of-transition story transpires near the conclusion of the three-year ministry of Jesus. The response to his teaching and healing has been phenomenal. The crowds of listeners, constantly growing in number, too large to be accommodated in any of their buildings, enthusiastically throng together, while many of the religious and political leaders appear to be growing critical and apprehensive. They are carefully observing this first century Occupy movement, reminding one another "We have to monitor this very carefully, because if it gets out of hand we could have a real mess on our hands." It is in the midst of this mounting excitement and apprehension that Jesus exclaims what has become one of the most widely quoted statements found in the New Testament: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their

life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8.34b, 35). If ever there was, or is, a transition-time call, this is it.

The words of Jesus become much more compelling, if we keep in mind two startling conversations between Jesus and Peter the disciple which occurred just prior to his proclamation, "If any want to become my followers." It appears that both conversations were essentially between Jesus and his disciples. In the first exchange he asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" And the disciples generally respond, "some say John the Baptist, or maybe one of the prophets, like Elijah." Then Jesus says, "But who do you say I am?" And Peter, who seems to have a talent for getting it very right or very wrong, steps forth and declares, "You are the Messiah." Jesus neither affirms or denies, but asks them to say nothing to anyone about this. But the assumption is that Peter got it right.

The second conversation between Jesus and Peter, which probably occurred a day or two after Peter's insightful identification of who Jesus truly is, calls Peter's comprehension into question. In this instance, Jesus is laying it out for the disciples, in essence telling things they have some rough times ahead: Jesus will be rejected by the religious leaders and authorities will put him to death. But in three days he will rise again. This time Peter is convinced Jesus has it all wrong, and he begins to tell him so. Jesus in response rebukes Peter, in no uncertain terms, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mark 8.33b). So in a matter of few hours Peter goes from having it all right to having it all wrong.

We cannot help but wonder: what in the world happened to Peter? . . . how could he be so right and so wrong? My hunch is that Peter in both instances was responding with the best of intentions. In the first scenario Peter may well have been feeling something like, "Look at all the crowds thronging around us, and they are getting bigger day by day. Even the officials cannot touch us with all this support and popularity. . . Yes, indeed, Jesus is the Messiah and my fellow disciples and I are in the inner circle . . . It doesn't get much better than this."

But in short order, and in no uncertain terms, Jesus rains on Peter's parade, with his talk of being betrayed and put to death, but then rising from the dead. But Peter may never have heard the part about rising from the dead, as he probably tuned out at the part about being put to death. Peter must have had a vision of his dreams suddenly going down the drain. They had come too far and achieved too much for the whole thing to go down the drain. We can almost see him grabbing Jesus' arm and, with the best of intentions, saying, "No Lord, let's not go down that road . . . no more of this defeatist talk . . . you can count on us, and we are not about to let this sort of thing happen."

Here we have all the essential elements of what constitutes a life-changing Transition Time. When I was younger and heard Jesus say, "If you want to follow me, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me," it was like a decision for all eternity. It felt like there was no room for doubt or slipping. I must somehow be just about perfect, every day and in every way. But as the years have gone by, and especially as I have struggled within in the hospital world, with staff patients and family members, who are often trying to find comfort in the midst of overwhelming pain as well as achieving some understanding in a situation which often seemed to defy meaning, it became much clearer to me that Transition Time is not a one time occurrence. Rather it is an ongoing experience, traveling from one mountain top transition time to the next mountain top transition time.

As we travel we recognize proceed through these transition times, there is no guarantee that life will come together and we will be walking forever on the sunny side of the street. No there will be dark valleys—betrayals, unexpected illnesses to cope with, disappointments with some we have trusted—yet somehow we will make it to the next mountain top. If we are wise we will draw upon those experiences which have helped us to gain wisdom. But, most important of all, we will cultivate and welcome the social network of friends and family that sustains us, remembering Jesus always kept his disciples close at hand. Undoubtedly there will be times when we may feel let down, as Jesus did with Peter. Notice that Jesus did not kick Peter out of disciples club, as I suspect he knew that Peter, while a bit confused of what it was all about, really had his best interests at heart. And above all, as we travel from transition time to transition time, and above all claim the promise that God made to Abraham and, I believe to each of us, “I will be God to you and to your offspring after you. . .” Genesis 17.16.

When you do this, then I believe you will appreciate these words which I recently received from a student from El Salvador. “When I experienced oppression in El Salvador, when I witnessed the suffering of innocent people persecuted and murdered by powerful forces of institutional evil, God heard my cries and the cries of God’s people. God was with us. When I experienced the grief of leaving my family and country of origin to walk on a journey to the unknown in the United States, God heard my cries and was with me. When I was a stranger in a foreign land God journeyed with me and sustained me. When I grieved the loss of personal identity and felt marginalized, God was with me.” May God be with you. Amen