

“CHANGE IS POSSIBLE”
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Galatians 1:11-24

The other night I was meeting with a group of people in a Bible study and we were studying the first kings of Israel. The whole subject of the week’s study was remembering what the people of God were like at that time, why they felt they needed a king to rule over them, and what happened when they had one – what happened to them, and what happened to the kings.

They needed a king because they had strayed far from their covenant with God. So God gave them a king, but then it was the king – first one, then another, then another, who strayed. Oh, they would start out all right – all faithful and everything – but the longer they were in office, the more they believed their publicity and had this “Messiah” complex, and then they failed, and often miserably.

It wasn’t a terribly uplifting night of Bible study, because what we discovered is that some things haven’t changed very much over the years. Too often, our leaders today do the same thing – start out good, then slide down a slippery slope of self-absorption and ego and self-preservation – and things turn out to be a mess.

All of which led us in class the other night to be pretty discouraged. If it was said once, it was said twenty times – what’s going to happen to us? It’s hopeless.

Truth be told, it does look hopeless. It does look like everyone in leadership looks out for himself or herself, and to heck with the rest of the country or the world. What will become of us? What will happen?

Once we start to ask those questions, it becomes not just a matter of national interest or international interest, it also becomes a matter of faith. Because the question ultimately becomes, do we believe that God can do anything with this mess we’re in?

And let’s take that a little further – not only can God do anything with this mess we’re in collectively, but for each of us, can God do anything with the mess I’m in – whatever that mess may be and whatever the cause. Can God do anything with what looks like impossible situations?

Well, today’s Epistle lesson presents us with a wonderful case study, if you

will, of just what God *can* do with impossible situations. The case study involves one named Saul of Tarsus. Let me remind you of the facts of the case of Saul of Tarsus, who we know better as the Apostle Paul.

Saul was a Jew, a Pharisee, from the area of Tarsus. He was a very devout man, learned in all aspects of the faith, particularly the Jewish law - not one you would expect would try to put down the newly formed Christian movement, yet that's exactly what he did – and he did it with a vengeance. He went after the new Christians, mostly on the basis of them not following the law, rather embracing a theology of grace.

Now, when I say he went after them, he really went after them. He was the greatest persecutor Christianity had ever known. He wanted to wipe them out. He went after them like a man possessed, because, well, he was.. In his opinion, what mattered was the law and only the law, and those grace-filled Christians needed to be gone.

From our point of view, from the point of view of those who know the love of Christ and faith in Him through grace, what was going on then was an impossible situation – a situation so fraught with danger that had Paul continued on that path the Christian movement might have been stopped. No doubt, many in that day might have asked the question, “Can God do anything with this terrible situation?”

Well, indeed, God did, as Paul says in this lesson in Galatians. God “called me through his grace, and was pleased to reveal his Son to me.” Let me read it to you another way, in the wonderful, lyrical words of the great writer and preacher Frederick Buechner. Here's his account of Paul's encounter with Christ:

He writes: “Paul was still in charge of a Pharisee goon squad in those days and was hell-bent for Damascus to round up some trouble-making Christians and bring them to justice. And then it happened. It was about noon when he was knocked flat by a blaze of light that made the sun look like a forty-watt bulb, and out of the light came a voice that called him by his Hebrew name twice. ‘Saul,’ it said, and then again, ‘Saul. Why are you out to get me?’ and when he pulled himself together enough to ask who it was he had the honor of addressing, what he heard to his horror was, ‘I'm Jesus of Nazareth, the one you're out to get.’ We're not told (Buechner writes) how long he lay there in the dust then, but it must have seemed at least six months. If Jesus of Nazareth had what it took to burst out of the grave like a guided missile, he thought, then he could polish off one bowlegged Christian-baiter without even noticing it, and Paul waited for the axe to fall. Only it wasn't an axe that fell. ‘Those boys in Damascus,’ Jesus said. ‘Don't fight them, join them. I want you on my side,’ and Paul never in his life forgot the sheer lunatic joy and astonishment of that moment. He was blind as a bat for three days

afterwards, but he made it to Damascus anyway and was baptized on the spot. He was never the same again, and neither, in a way, was the world. (Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, “Paul,” p. 128.)

An impossible transformation, yet it happened, and it happened by the hand of God! God made something good – no, something incredibly wonderful – happen. He made the greatest persecutor Christianity had ever known into the greatest evangelist Christianity has ever had! Which just goes to show that what scripture says is absolutely, positively true – with God nothing is impossible!

And oh, how we need to remember that, because we so easily get discouraged and doubt that things can change – whether it is world or national situations, or situations in our own lives – whether it is nation lifting up sword against nation, or parents and children fighting with one another – whether it is a failure of leadership in our government, or a personal failure of our own because of sin. We need to always remember that change is possible, that God can make a way, and that nothing is impossible with Him!

And then, in the meantime, while we’re still in the midst of impossible situations, we need to believe that God can change it – we need to believe it, work for it, and be faithful.

I read two accounts these week of people who did just that – faced impossible situations by trusting God, being faithful and doing their part.

One was a Jewish rabbi. He moved into a neighborhood when he was hired by a temple to be their leader. He was very excited about his new ministry, until one day he got a terrible phone call, where the caller said him, “Hey Jew-boy. Go back to where you belong, or else watch out.”

A couple of days later, he received a horribly ugly letter in his mailbox, which basically threatened him to get out of town, you “blankety blank Jew,” or I will kill you, the writer said.

The writer turned out to be the local leader of the Ku Klux Klan. Over and over again, he threatened the rabbi. The rabbi finally found out who he was, and it turns out that the man lived not far from him, and he was disabled and bound to a wheelchair.

In an attempt to stop the situation, the rabbi tried to call him, but to no avail, the man never answered.

But that didn’t stop the rabbi. Again and again, he tried, and then, one day, the KKK leader picked up the phone. The rabbi had been preparing himself for that very moment, and heeded the advice of his wife who told him that when the man

finally answered, he should just simply say to him, “I hear you’re disabled. I thought you might need a ride to the grocery store.”

Well, nothing came of that conversation, or so the rabbi thought, until one night his phone rang again, and it was that man, and this is what he said to the rabbi: “I want to get out of what I’m doing, and I don’t know how.” As soon as the rabbi hung up the phone, he and his wife went over to the man’s house and they began to talk, and slowly but surely a friendship developed

And later on, when that man’s health worsened, the rabbi and his wife moved him into their own home to care for him. The man renounced the KKK and became a person of faith. An impossible situation like that changed because God is faithful, and because a man of faith trusted that, believed that, and lived toward it. (“Lessons on Love, From a Rabbi Who Knows Hate and Forgiveness,” The NY Times, 1/4/09)

The other story is from the writings of James Moore. It was an experience that he had early in his ministry. As many seminary students do, Moore took a course in Clinical Pastoral Education, which means you volunteer in a hospital setting and learn how to be a better pastor through your experiences there.

Moore tells how one day he reported for duty to the hospital and a nurse told him there was a special case for him. Mrs. Davis was a patient who was scheduled for extremely risk brain surgery the next day, and she was in a bad way. She was miserable, filled with self-pity, sure she was all alone, and was going to die – she really needed his help.

Well, Jim Moore had only been at this ministry stuff a little while, and didn’t know a whole lot, but he knew he could do something he’d been taught – called “reflective listening.” He would listen to Mrs. Davis and reflect back to her what she had said.

So with a little bit of confidence he began to walk toward her room, when all of a sudden the nurse came running up to him and said, “Oh I forgot. Her situation is so tenuous that the doctors want her to stay completely calm, so she is not supposed to talk at all.”

“Great,” he thinks as he goes to enter her room. “Now what am I going to do?” Well, trusting that God went with him, he went into her room. It was dark, with the curtains drawn, there were no cards, no flowers, no family. Mrs. Davis was laying back on her pillow looking pathetic.

He didn’t have a clue what to do. In an attempt to look confident, he had

pushed open her door, only to have it slam against the wall. When he moved to get near her, he kicked her bed. He stammered and stuttered and said all the wrong things. Finally, in desperation he tried to pray and butchered that as well. He walked out of the room embarrassed, with tears in his eyes, ready to quit the ministry.

A few days later, he was working in the hospital again, and he went right up to that floor to see what had happened with Mrs. Davis. He was almost afraid to find out. He was shocked to see on the chart that she was in a step-down room and her condition was marked “good.” So he went right in to see her, and listen to what happened. He said to her, “Mrs. Davis, you probably don’t remember me.” “Don’t remember you?” she said. “How could I ever forget you? You saved my life!”

“But I don’t understand,” Jim replied. “I felt so terrible. I was so ashamed. I did everything wrong!”

“That’s just it,” she replied. “I felt so sorry for you! It was the first time I had felt anything but self-pity for months. That little spark of compassion ignited in me the will to live! And the doctors tell me it made all the difference.” (James W. Moore, *Lord, I Have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses*, “Sin and Redemption,” p. 94)

You see, change is possible, God can make a way, there is nothing impossible with Him. We are simply called to believe that, trust that, and work with God toward it coming true.

Now, I don’t know what your impossible situation might be. It might be big – a family issue, an issue of sin, a job situation, a money situation. It might be so big and have been going on so long, you can’t possibly see a way out. My invitation to you, to all of us, is to let Paul’s incredible story remind us that nothing is impossible with God – absolutely nothing. Change is possible – even when we can’t see that it can happen.

Situations can be changed, can be redeemed; people can be changed and redeemed; you can be changed and redeemed. Trust that, believe it, and work with God toward it.

So I want to close with one other thing a wise pastor once said. He told about how every once in a while he would be driving through his town and pass this nasty place filled with huge piles of old cars and scrap metal and all sorts of junk. Then one day, when he was driving by, he saw great quantities of scrap iron being loaded onto a railroad car. It was going to be sent to a factory to be reclaimed, to be melted down and remade into something new. It could come out as surgeons’ tools or

fenders for a new car, or maybe even a steeple for a church, he said. Who knows what it may be (he continued), but it will be new and useful and valuable.

And then, he finished with this powerful thought: “If we can do that with our old scrap iron, how much more can God do with human beings, people like you and me. God wants to reclaim us, reshape us. God wants to redeem us. (Ibid)

And, I might add, how much more can God do with impossible situations?

With God all things are possible. Trust that, believe that, and work toward that. May it be so. Amen.