

Sermon from June 14, 2015 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev. Karen Swanson

Change and transition is an inevitable part of life. We may be frightened by it, despair over it or be excited by it, but we can't stop it. It just is. One ancient philosopher made this point by saying "You can never step into the same stream twice," and he is right. Even if in one moment the stream seems to be following the same course and supporting the same life forms, as in the moment(s) before, the water that makes up the stream is forever changing.

All Saints, of course, is in the midst of change and transition. Father Rob left All Saints about a year ago now. With your input, the Vestry selected a Search Committee to help you find a new rector. That committee is now actively searching for candidates, based on the preferences you expressed in the parish profile.

Sue Smith, whom we honor today, is also in transition, facing many changes. She will soon move to a new living situation in Oregon, closer to her family. For most of her life, she has lived in this area and called All Saints her home.

The students in the congregation who have moved from one level of education to another, or who have graduated altogether, are in transition too. They face growing levels of responsibility and independence as they mature. For some, these changes will come

none too soon; others will be rattled by them. The students and their families will make adjustments as they transition.

Our first reading from Scripture today describes a situation of transition. The first king of Israel, Saul, is now gone. Although the prophet Samuel is still grieving over Saul, God asks him to prepare to anoint the next king. God sends the prophet Samuel to the home of Jesse of Bethlehem. One of his sons will be the new king, and Samuel is to anoint him. Jesse's first son Eliab is introduced to Samuel. Samuel is impressed with him. He is tall with rippling muscles; in today's world he might have made the cover of the *Gentleman's Quarterly* magazine. "Surely this is the one!" Samuel exclaims.

But, no. The Lord speaks: "This is not the one . . . for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Neither Jesse's second son Abinadab nor his third son Shammah is meant by God to be king either. Nor are the fourth, fifth, sixth or seventh sons. As it turns out, the son with the least status, the kid brother of the handsome Eliab, the baby of the family, the one originally left out of those who gathered for the sacrifice, is the one with the heart that meets God's need. Samuel is to anoint the young shepherd boy David.

Do you remember Susan Boyle, and her initial appearance on “Britain’s Got Talent?” When Susan first walked out on the stage, people rolled their eyes. To the audience, the woman looked like a “loser.” She was 47 years old. Her eyebrows were bushy. Her hair was a bit unruly. She carried extra weight around her face and middle. When she spoke with the judges, she stumbled over her words. The audience seemed to expect that the upcoming singing act would be a sad spectacle, and that it would end with one, two or perhaps all three of the judges rejecting this woman who did not look or act the part of a vocal star.

And then Susan began to sing. She sang “I dreamed a dream” with all her heart in a lovely and powerful voice. The judges looked at each other in wonder. Surprise! The audience leapt to their feet, cheering wildly. “Yes, definitely yes, the biggest yes ever” the judges proclaimed. Immediately the performance went viral. A new life began for Susan.

Surprise! It was not the outward appearance that mattered, but the heart. Susan’s story parallels that of David. Neither was perceived by others to have much to offer. And yet they were chosen from among more likely candidates to move forward, one by a panel of judges, and the other by God. It’s just like God to use

what seems to be an unlikely character – a Gentile, a poor peasant, a woman, a shepherd – to play key roles in the drama of salvation.

In the Gospel story today, Jesus talks about how a farmer sows his seeds, and harvests the crop, but can do little to get the seeds to crack open and grow into larger and larger plants. This part is done by God while the farmer sleeps and waits. This parable is less powerful for us today, because today's farmers (and gardeners) do more than ancient farmers to encourage the growth of seeds. We add nutrients to enrich the soil, and sometimes spray chemical to get rid of insect pests or weeds. We irrigate. It seems like we work hard between the planting and the harvest. Even so, it is true that there is a mystery that we cannot name or make happen in the growing. This is where God comes in, says the parable. While we sleep and wait, God brings the plant to life and mysteriously grows it to maturity.

It is also God who brings our spiritual lives to fruition. We come to church, read the Bible, reflect and pray. Yet it is God who blesses our efforts, and in His own way and own time, gifts us with fuller and more meaningful lives.

The second Gospel parable also speaks about farming and nature. It talks about how the tiniest of all seeds- a mustard seed-

barely visible to the naked eye, becomes the greatest of all shrubs. With God's help it grows from tiny to tremendous. In our time and culture, we might speak of a redwood tree, and the small pine cone seed from which it develops.

The reign of God is like this, too, Jesus says. What we can do often seems small. We come to church, sometimes. We may study the Bible, or not. Perhaps we work at the food pantry or on a committee. We contribute money. We may talk to others about what our faith means to us. We try to be kind, loving, and just people, and sometimes we fail and sometimes we do well. We lend a hand when we can. All this matters. Our efforts make an important difference. And yet, it is God who takes all these little things we each do, and grows them into a worldwide kingdom, here in some ways, and still to come in other ways, a kingdom in which God reigns and there is peace and justice and love for all.

It is a little bit like Jack and the beanstalk. As you may remember, Jack and his mother lived hand to mouth, dependent on the milk from the family cow. When that milk dried up, Jack's mother asked him to sell the cow so that they could continue to eat. Jack traded the cow to an older gentleman for five magic beans. When his mother heard what Jack had done she called him a fool, and threw the useless beans out the window. The next day, a giant

beanstalk reached from heaven to earth. That beanstalk, mysteriously grown from the useless magic beans, became the source of lifelong well-being for Jack and his mother when Jack found at the top of the beanstalk, a wealthy giant and a goose who laid golden eggs.

The Gospel is more than a fairy tale. Yet like a fairy tale, it asks us to trust in a power beyond ourselves who blesses our efforts to bring food to the hungry, justice to the oppressed, peace to the harried, and joy to the discouraged.