

Tomorrow's People¹

I'm certain that I'm speaking for our entire congregation in saying how proud we are of all of you and how appreciative we are of the sheer hard work that you've put in to reach this point. Ask anyone my age if he or she would like to be doing algebra problems or reading Brave New World or "Hamlet" or applying to college and taking a chance on rejection, or moving into this job market, or having to respond to a text message. Back in my day, texting—do you know what we called it? Morse Code. And no one knew how to do that. Anyway, we're admiring you today, even if we're not admitting how much we're admiring you.

The generations are more different today than they were in my day. When I was a senior in High School, my grandparents totally agreed with my parents that I needed to be grounded or disciplined or whatever. Now, I'll tell you a secret. Your grandparents totally don't understand what your parents are thinking in the way they've raised you. What I'm talking about is the fact that the world keeps changing so rapidly that it is more and more difficult for people older than you to really understand what your world is like. You've heard of the Greatest Generation, (they're the ones who sacrificed by winning WWII). There's my group, the Baby Boomers (We're the ones who

¹ Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on May 9, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Georgia.

sacrificed by having to get off the couch to change the TV channels), then there are those generations x, y, and z. Clearly, the people naming these latter groups think that the world is coming to an end with young people today. Where do you go after z?

Supposedly, you're right on the cusp between y and z. Your younger brothers and sisters are definitely generation z. The Z's are the most wired group. That means they have Facebook pages and twitter. That means that when your parents are giving your younger siblings a lecture, they can immediately text out and get a second opinion.

Actually, the difference between generations has always been a reality—especially in times of rapid change. Our lesson from Numbers illustrates this. It narrates an episode right in the middle of the great journey of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt to being their own society in the Promised Land. Our text comes from the middle of the story when the people are in the desert and preparing to move into the Promised Land. They send out a little team of secret investigators to spy out the territory that God has promised to the Hebrews. And--horrors--the land is occupied by imposing looking people who don't seem interested in making room. Report of the land's inhabitants is alarming news to the desert wanderers who cry and

complain and blame Moses and kick up a fuss and refuse to budge. What happens is that their journey comes to a halt right there on the hot sand of the Sinai wilderness. Meltdown. What further happens is that the people stay stuck for 40 years, which is time enough for the entire generation that blazed the freedom trail out of Pharaoh's Egypt, to reach the end of their natural lives.

We read in the text that God is very angry with the people who don't want to carry their amazing journey across the finish line. God basically gives up on one generation and waits for their children—the ones who were never in Egypt but were born in the desert. In other words, it takes a whole new group to move the great journey forward.

There's a powerful principle in play in this lesson that I think speaks to all of us as we are enjoying your success and the prospects for your future. In order for you and me to move ahead on the path that God is leading us on, we need from time to time, to adopt some pretty significant personal changes—attitude adjustments, changes of heart. Once the people decided that maybe the desert was their best choice and that there really was no land flowing with milk and honey, that's when the journey stopped. That's where their graves were dug.

Jesus teaches this all over the place. "You cannot put new wine in an old wineskin." You've got to get a new wineskin for the new. You've got to be a new person in order to contain what God would give. Unless you turn and become like little children—notice the generation thing—you've got to think young in order to get the Kingdom thing.

You've probably noticed that church seems like a pretty traditional, even staid place. People look to churches to advocate traditional values. Congregations are populated by mature people. But our faith counterbalances this tendency towards traditionalism with a very bracing message: change, repent, be born again. We can't move forward with God and stay like we are now.

I look at you, I look at all of us, and I'm thinking that the entire world is in a season of comprehensive upheaval. We don't have wars and famine so much as we have a deep reassessment of values. When I was your age, the principles of family, faith, country, education and so on were still basically traditional. I believe that that stability is giving way to a new mode where we all must confront some really deep and unnerving questions in the next few years. What does it mean to be educated? What is family? What is faith? What about other

faiths? What is patriotic? What is good and virtuous? What does it mean to be a man or a woman? What is classy?

I wish that there was an enduring traditional answer to these questions that I could press upon you. But what I really think is that in a time of such deep transition that there will be no easy answers. Your ability to change, adapt, retool, start again, repent will be an enduring gift to keep you moving towards freedom and salvation. Certainly, that's the story of the Exodus. The people had to grit their teeth and confront the Pharaoh. They had to forsake their desire to go back to Egypt. They had to trust God day by day. None of this came naturally. People had to have repeated attitude adjustments to stay on the trail.

Now, I dare not leave the message to the graduates as just always change and keep up with the times and everything will be alright. That would be a recipe for disaster. The change our faith holds up to you and me is always a turning towards God. The Hebrews wailing in the desert were doing their own thinking. They calculated that they weren't up to competing with the people that were in the Promised Land, and maybe the land wasn't so promising and so on. What they had forgotten was that when they let God guide them they defeated a much more powerful civilization in Egypt. But years later in the desert the people

had subtly turned away from the God who had performed miracle after miracle to even get them that far. The key to the deep change of self that I'm talking about is the "closer walk with God" as the great old spiritual puts it.

You've all done research projects. You go to the library and internet and get material for your research paper. You gather information from a variety of sources, write it down, collect a bunch of books, and you reach a point when you sit down to write it up. Now, imagine that at just the moment when you plan to start writing, you disappear. All that is there are your notes and books—the big mess of papers and ideas that you had gathered. Could another student or even your parents write up that paper? Not really. They couldn't because only you know the thread of ideas and how you planned to pull all that information together.

Life is like that. God has created and pulled together all the stuff and information for life. That's your life that God has given you. The thing is that only God knows how it all fits together. Only the author knows the path through the litter and profusion of notes and information and resources and ideas.

This is why our faith teaches us that our lives are a guided journey. Jesus calls disciples who are basically

followers. In the time of the Exodus, God guides the people with a cloud in the day and a pillar of fire in the night.

When I talk about the deep necessity of change it always takes the form of saying to yourself, "I've missed the path because I haven't been paying attention to where God is leading me." Let me say, that just to come to that conclusion is a gut wrenching change of heart.

Now you might be thinking. The preacher says, "Turn to God." Well, of course, that's what they pay preachers to say. That's the main talking point. To that I'd reply, okay, you're right, we've all heard that. But it works. Early last week I was talking with one of you about making some change in the attitudes of people in LaGrange. Many of you are engaged in committee work and public service. Anyway, we were talking about how sometimes it appears that working for change is futile. The next day I was getting ready for my Sunday School class with the Celebrations. I was reading about the particularly Christian virtue of patience. Why patience? Because God is patient. Because God eventually will be all in all. His kingdom is invincible. It'll come eventually, and I need to chill and trust that. You know, if I'd remembered that, I would have been a lot more optimistic in the previous day's conversation about change in people's attitudes in LaGrange.

Now that is right off the top of my head. I could think of a better example. But I share it with you because it's so fresh. I don't have to go back very far to the zillionth reminder that God will guide me well. That's my consistent experience. Again and again Jesus, his teaching, his principles, brilliantly lights the path forward in a very murky, changing, confusing, frustrating world. It takes work to return again and again to that. I have to change to keep up with him. But it's the way forward. The land of promise is still in front of us. Jesus will get you there.

Be brave enough to change your mind. And remember all right change is turning to God. Let that be God's invitation for each of you on this happy day in your journey.