Sermon on Epiphany 6
(Jeremiah 17:5-10; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26)

What is the only constant in life? Change! That’s what we call a paradox, something that seems like a contradiction but upon examination isn’t; it’s actually true!

I’ve spent the last week thinking about this paradox. Anglican priests spend three weeks a year on study leave, attending to their spiritual health and ongoing learning.

We do it in different ways; sometimes we participate in spiritual retreats, I’ve been doing that for the last several years at the beginning of May when I help lead a retreat for businessmen and clergy across several denominations; I’m usually the only Anglican there!

Sometimes we take courses; I’ve been chipping away at a series of counselling courses that help me, first of all understand my own struggles, and, with God’s help, help me become a more effective priest and leader.

That’s what I was doing this past week; I was writing a paper about Herb, a man who, by means of a logging accident became a paraplegic at the age of 35.

Herb spent the first few years after his accident wondering if life was worth living; constantly asking the question, “what did I do to deserve this?” and “Why did this accident happen to me?”

He was struggling with grief over an irretrievable loss; the activities that he had previously enjoyed, working in the forest, hiking on the weekends, swimming in the lake, all cruelly ripped from his life.

His identity was changed, from an able-bodied, healthy man to someone, he was embarrassed to admit, he himself would have avoided interacting with in the past: a dis-abled person.

When I think of Herb, and the losses he endured, the change of identity that was thrust upon him, I think, actually, of all of us.

The changes we experience, whether as individuals or a community may not feel as dramatic as those that happen to Herb, but whether through changing of economic or relational fortunes,

whether through illness, the loss of marriage, the death of a partner, the downsizing of a company or simply the realization that we are never going to become what we once imagined we’d become, each of us struggle with the same questions that Herb struggles with

What did I do to deserve this? Why did this have to happen to me? To us?

Part of what counsellors do, and, I might add, any engaged reading of scripture does, is challenge the questions we ask ourselves.

Perhaps you noticed the implicit assumptions in the questions; assumptions that I had to struggle to help Herb see for himself, assumptions that I still struggle with when I become aware of changes that I do not immediately welcome.

It turns out the changes we experience are not about “deserving” or “not deserving.” To understand life as a kind of account balance in which a “hidden hand,” call it fate, call it god, hands out radical changes based on some measure of “deserving” is to ask a question that is not in tune with reality.

It’s part of what Jeremiah means when he says “the heart is devious above all else, it is perverse, who can understand it?” It turns out with all our amazing brain capacity we routinely make this most obvious of errors, we acknowledge that the one constant of life is change and yet when change happens to us we want to make it about something we deserve or don’t deserve!

We can do this with our scriptures; we can take scriptures like our first reading from Jeremiah and Psalm 1 as ways to ensure that we’ll be blessed, as technologies of blessedness if you will: if we do this, then this will happen.

Then we will be protected from sickness and pain, then we will be secure and safe in a kind of unchanging bubble.

As a counsellor I’d say that’s a coping mechanism based on delusion; as a priest I would say that’s a way of reading scripture that leads us away from dynamic that is at the heart of it all: trusting in God.

Trusting in God isn’t a way to avoid anything; trusting in God isn’t a way to *get* anything; it’s the way to live *with* everything! As Jeremiah says, trusting in God is what enables us to continue to flourish and live when the heat comes, when the drought comes; for surely, the heat will come, the drought will come; that’s what life is; constant and inexorable change!

The turning point for Herb comes, when together we forge a therapeutic alliance where we can explore a different question from the ones that are leading him into thoughts that life is not worth living.

Instead of “why did this have to happen to me?” we shift the focus, “I don’t have legs, but I’m alive and every day is the beginning of the rest of my life!”

 Then Herb can begin to ask this question, “how am I willing to live in this remarkable moment, with this exceptional opportunity to explore the life I have?”

Though at first extremely difficult, Herb begins to live into the spirit of the question; he begins to grasp that fate/God didn’t do anything to him, that he’s not a puppet on the end of a string.

He begins to grasp the awe of existence; that he has a radical freedom to explore and craft a new identity.

He begins to be grateful that he lives in a society that affords quite a bit of help towards disabled people; gratefulness that one of the ways meaning can be renewed in him is to work for even greater awareness and opportunities for people like himself.

Without acknowledging it; Herb has experienced what Jesus is talking about in our gospel: the blessedness of loss, of change; the blessedness of going through a difficult time and then with the help of others, with the help of God, realizing that what you feared the most, the loss of meaning and purpose, the loss of a reason to live hasn’t happened!

In fact, something like the opposite has happened, a renewed meaning for living has appeared and this time, because it’s been hard won, it’s more vivid, it’s more seared into his soul than when he was able-bodied!

Even in the midst of loss, the Kingdom is near; indeed, it may be that these changes challenge us to sink our roots deeper into that which truly nourishes us; to leave the delusion of the false security of wealth to the side!

Today these themes come together for this community; we can all relate to the pervasiveness of change in our personal and family lives, but all that I’ve said about Herb is equally applicable to us, to St. Thomas.

It’s normal for us to want St. Thomas to be what we once imagine it was: large, prosperous, children and youth everywhere, our version of what we imagine an able-bodied parish is like.

Of course, even such a remembrance, often brackets out the dysfunctional aspects: the elitism, the intolerance, the narrowness of vision and the lack of mutual love and support.

We probably won’t be helped much if, in our Annual Meeting today, we dwell on the question, “why did the changes that have come upon us have to happen?” “What did we do to deserve this?”

Rather, even if difficult, if we ask “how are we willing to live in this remarkable moment, with this exceptional opportunity to explore the life we have?” we will find a new creativity, a way forward in crafting a renewed identity that will come with its own gifts and challenges.

Trusting in the Lord, in our context, is similar to what Paul was trying to convey to the Corinthians, a trust in God’s resurrection newness that comes to fruition in our relational integrity, in our willingness to exercise leadership for the common good; to focus on the kindness and patience of love and to value all the gifts that we have right now, not ones we pine for from an imagined past.

Will we do this easily? No, life is a struggle to adjust to the changes that come; I struggle as your priest; we struggle as council members and as parishioners to know what to do; none of us are experts in “how to fashion new meaning in the midst of change.”

None of us have mastered blessedness. But all of us can learn to face our anxiety and begin to trust that, through the heat and the drought, through the good and the bad, our souls can prosper; that through us our world can know a little more of the presence that will, that is, making all things new.

Let’s practice this Eucharistic promise and presence at our Annual Meeting today; it’s the first day of the rest of our lives; it’s the remarkable opportunity we have to trust in Christ who is among us and in us, before and behind us and always for us. Amen.