

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
February 10, 2019
Isaiah 6:1-8; Luke 5:1-11

There are certain events in our lives, turning points, that make all the difference. Perhaps there are certain people, or experiences, or even losses that become moments of crisis—crisis meaning a time of decision, a critical point, a crossroads, a crunch—a moment of truth, point-of-no-return. These moments happen more than once in a lifetime, but still, there are certain events or realizations that bigger than the others—that change everything. Break-through moments. When the big questions of life come into focus and a path appears out of nowhere in front of you. For Isaiah, it was the year King Uzziah died. About 740 BC. If King Uzziah represented stability to Judah, what did his death mean? Isaiah says that he saw the Lord and with his glory all the temple shone.... For Simon Peter, James and John, it seems to have happen on boat when they were fishing. Nothing strange about that—they worked on boats everyday. They had fished all night and caught nothing, until Jesus told them to go out into the deep and throw the nets out again. They caught so many fish their nets almost broke. But it wasn't really about the fish. It was about their experience—a big oversized experience. It was the enormous implication of their experience that frightened them and lead them to give up everything else and follow Jesus.

Dr Howard Thurman tells the story of going through the Kyber Pass, a mountain pass in the northwest of Pakistan on the border with Afghanistan. Throughout history, the Cyber Pass has been an important trade route and a strategic military choke point to control. After WWI the British built a heavily engineered railway through the Pass. It opened in 1925. Dr. Thurman had been on an American delegation to meet Mahatma Gandhi—the first African American to have an audience with the great Indian independence movement leader. It is said that Gandhi was very interested to meet Dr. Thurman. He had a question to ask him. “How can it be,” Gandhi wanted to know, “that people of color in the United States are Christian, when it is this Christian nation that has treated them so poorly.” Dr. Thurman doesn't share with us the details of their conversation, but when he was on his way back to the States, he traveled through the Kyber Pass. I'm told the vision is breath-taking. The summit of the pass is 3 miles inside Pakistan, the lowest

point is in the Valley of Peshawar surrounded by mountain ranges on three sides. I imagine there was a great silence. Dr. Thurman came away with a conviction that shaped the rest of his life and mission. Here is what he wrote:

Meaningful and creative experiences between peoples can be more compelling than all the ideas, concepts, faiths, fears, ideologies, and prejudices that divide them; and absolute faith that if such experiences can be multiplied and sustained over a time interval of sufficient duration any barrier that separates one person from another can be undermined and eliminated.

Let me say this in simpler terms:

All barriers between people can be overcome and eliminated when they share meaningful experiences over a sustained period of time.

Ten years after this life-changing event Dr. Thurman founded the first multiracial congregation in the United States in San Francisco, CA. and is revered as the chaplain, the mentor to many of the civil rights movement leaders including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Dr. Thurman was a voice of hope that buoyed the movement. Who was relied upon for his conviction and confidence that even segregation and its underlying hatred and racism could be overcome.

I have experienced certain events in my life, turning points, that make all the difference. Each one of us has, if you've lived long enough. Life is full of moments of crisis—times of decision, critical points, a crossroads, a crunch—moments of truth, new realizations and convictions, points of no return. For me, life changing realizations followed an illness when I was 24 years old. Ten years later there was a handgun incident in downtown Baltimore when I was in my 30s. In my 40s an emersion in the frigid January waters of Sea of Galilee changed everything. Later, I suffered a frightening experience when I thought my child was in emotional and physical danger. And in my 50s I rediscovered the writings of Dr. Howard Thurman that had actually been introduced to me 30 years earlier. But now, his words and insights and convictions took on urgent meaning. I spent a summer reading every book by Dr. Thurman in print. There are perhaps 20 books that I keep close at hand. His conviction shaped my own convictions—a way of understanding and shaping how I understand my life and the ministry that we share—and also what I plan to work on and accomplish in the future.

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of time.*

These words help me understand and guide how we shape ministry at Epiphany Church. Over the years I have watched barriers between people be *overcome and eliminated* because we have *shared meaningful experiences over a sustained period of time*. I asked Jim Conboy the other day at lunch if he has any idea what happened in his life to make him such a good person. I was surprised by his answer. He said, “My mother.” “What about your mother?” I asked. “She was part of a group of women here at Epiphany Church. They made turkey dinners for people and took them up to the polling place. (He began to recall the names of all those women.) George Watts would deliver them. They sold Christmas cards. Raised money for the church. Every Sunday George Watts stopped by the house—he picked up five women to bring them to church. Mom was one of them. She passed some of her goodness on to her three boys. At the dinner table, David and I used to compete about our baseball teams—he played for Glen Burnie and I played for Odenton. Mom didn't like that talk. She said it was

“not necessary.” The stuff of everyday life and everyday people—sharing meaningful experiences over a sustained period of time. It’s that simple and it’s that profound. People ask me what makes Epiphany so warm and inviting. How it is that we are a multiracial community in a segregated world. The answer may very well be—that simple and that profound.

This past year we worked together to prepare for a Centennial celebration of Epiphany as the only WWI Chapel in the United States. There were lots of high points—wonderful mountain top experiences. You might say we traveled through the Kyber Pass and went down into the valley of faith and hard work. Boulders. Iron Poppies. Music. Grants. Costumes. Bronze Plaques. Crocheted gifts. Landscape engineers. Gardens. Tulips. Special Guests. Musicians. Tents. And then came the rain. And more rain. And a downpour. There were smiles and good cheer. And hardworking people faithful to the task. Maybe that immersion—that baptism— is for us a moment, a turning point, that makes all the difference. A time of decision. A critical crossroad. A crunch. A moment of truth. A point-of-no-return. I think I see the difference.

I think we are different now than we were before. I see new faces and know that they know that something is going on here—shared leadership, sustained experiences, barriers eliminated and overcome. They see something, some one, a community, that they would like to learn more about. The Centennial was not just about our past—it has become a conviction, a way of life and being together, that will carry us into the future.

Amen.