“Transforming Vision”  
*Acts of the Apostles 9.1–20*  
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Before I launch into the sermon, I’d like to take a very informal, non-scientific poll, just to see where we are this morning. So, please raise your hands if this applies to you:

1) Do you feel confused or anxious about the current political climate of our nation, especially as it is being played out in presidential primaries?
2) Do you feel confused or anxious about the changes in our national or global economy, whether it is about trade imbalances, income disparity, or your own financial life?
3) Do you feel confused or anxious about the current search process for a settled full-time associate minister (the position Jake currently holds)?
4) Do you feel confused or anxious about the upcoming search process for a settled part-time associate minister (the position Jane Anne currently holds)?
5) Do you feel confused or anxious about all of the construction on and around the CSU campus, including the new stadium, and what that might mean for Plymouth in the future?

The reason that you may have sensed confusion or anxiety about any of those circumstances is that we are in an in-between time, standing right in the threshold between the past and the future, and the transition matters. As a nation, we are making decisions about how to move forward beyond the conclusion of the Obama Administration on January 20th of the coming year. And we are concerned that our economy is marked by widening gaps in economic opportunity. And what we see in our culture is a marked lack of civility in discussing those issues. And I don’t know about you, but that makes my nerves feel a little jangly sometimes.

And here at Plymouth, we entered a threshold time when Sharon, our last settled associate minister, left a year and a half ago; and while we have all benefitted from the ministries of Jake and Jane Anne, none of us knows whether they will be called to serve in those settled positions. That sense of the unknown can — at certain moments — be unnerving for them, for the rest of the staff, and for our congregation. And those of you who are around here during the week cannot help but be affected by the construction traffic on Prospect Road and marvel at the rapid construction happening across Lake Street at CSU. And it may make you wonder how all of that will have an impact on Plymouth.

All of those unknowns and their related anxieties swirl around us and affect us in different ways. For some of you, it’s no problem…you just roll with it! And for others, you worry about what might come in the future. And those anxieties ripple through the congregation just as they do in a family system. [mobile]

Years ago, Cameron’s grandmother gave him a mobile to hang from his bedroom ceiling, and it is filled with golden retrievers. Any family or any congregation is much like a mobile in the way it responds and reacts to change in another part of a system. For instance, a change in a family (like the arrival of a new baby) may affect the mom physically, but it moves every member of the family emotionally. Every member of the family is connected emotionally to each other. And if there is an illness with one member, it affects everyone to a greater or lesser extent.
That sort of family system also is at play in a congregation. When a minister leaves, it sends ripples through the system, even if you don't notice the ripples. And while we have been blessed by having Jake and Jane Anne with us, we still are in a threshold time of not knowing what God has in store for us. And if you add the anxiety many of us sense about our national political climate, and the seismic movements in our economy, sometimes the amplitude of the waves in the system gets tweaked, even though the macro issues don't have anything to do with what is happening within our congregation. Those macro-transitions might be manifested as being a little less patient, a little more critical, or being a little frightened by the prospect of change. And those are pretty normal (if not ideal) responses to anxiety in the overall system.

Here is another question for you to respond to with a raised hand: How many of you wonder what this has to do with Paul the apostle and today's scripture?

All of us go through transitions in our lives, some big, some small, some in between. And each of us needs a different level of stimulus in order to push us into that threshold moment. Some of us need only a little incentive to change (maybe we see that we have gained five pounds, and the scale provides motivation). Others need a 2x4 applied swiftly to the side of our heads. For Paul (who is still called by his old name, Saul, in today's story), it wasn't even a 2x4, it was a blinding light that knocked him to the ground.

This kind of event is a major opportunity to re-attune ourselves and adjust our priorities.

Threshold moments invite us to step from one way of being into the next. “A threshold is not simply a boundary,” wrote John O'Donohue, “it is a frontier that divides two different territories, rhythms, or atmospheres.”¹ We all know what that is like, because we live in Colorado in March and April: we have the promise of spring punctuated by ripping-good snow storms. Some of us have lived through divorce or the death of a spouse. Becoming a parent is an immense threshold time. It took me years to summon the courage to have children, because I wondered if I could be a good father. (“Parent” is an entirely new role on the other side of pregnancy, which can be really anxiety-inducing for some…and it has an anxious twin that emerges when parents become empty-nesters.)

We have a nice, long narrative in today's scripture about Paul in the days of his persecution of followers of “the Way” and then of Ananias being sent by God to help the scales fall from his eyes and restore his sight, but we have no indication of what happened during the three days when Paul was blinded. What was going on for Paul, as his colleagues brought him into Damascus? The men were totally confused because they had heard the voice, but they didn't see who had spoken the words. Paul, however, experienced the full force of the 2x4.

What was going on for Paul in those three days? (Does it remind you of another three-day threshold time of someone else who goes through a major transformation and comes back changed? Remember Easter?) Paul ate nothing during that time, which can affect one's perceptions. And having been blinded can do the same thing. Paul entered a liminal space, a threshold, a crossing from one way of living into another way of living.

Those three days of fasting, darkness, and unknowing must have been tortuous for him. Can you imagine the sorts of confusion and anxiety he felt during the transition? I wonder if it was akin to the experience of a caterpillar in the chrysalis.

¹ John O'Donohue, To Bless the Space between Us. (NY: Doubleday, 2008, p. 43).
Sometimes when we are in those liminal spaces, we want to rush past the threshold, settle the unsettled, resolve the unresolved, and move ahead. (This is especially true for men in our society, who are taught to solve problems and fix things, and to do so quickly and efficiently and without complaint, so that we can move ahead.) But sometimes we need to stay within the bounds of the threshold (the chrysalis) to try and learn from God what we need to learn before rushing ahead, even if the learning process is painful. It is like grief that way, which can be a tremendous teacher, but one we would rather not acknowledge or dwell with too long, because of the discomfort it involves.

Paul has no choice but to sit with his discomfort and allow it to instruct and guide him. God has a message and a purpose for Paul, but he is not aware of it at the outset of our story…it takes essentially being struck by lightning and wandering in the shadows of threshold time for three days for Paul to open himself to what may lay on the other side of the doorway for him.

It must have required tremendous patience and a huge measure of faith for Paul just to hang in for three days when the “territories, rhythms, and atmospheres” of his life were shifting. Do you imagine Paul screaming and crying during those three days? Do you imagine him sitting stoically and asking God what was happening to him? Do you imagine him undergoing a profound change of heart in that time? Remember this is a huge transition: kind of like being turned from a KKK leader into a freshly minted protester in the Civil Right movement in the space of three days. What would it have been like to be Paul in the midst of that metamorphosis? We only get a hint, knowing that he was praying and that as his threshold time was concluding, that he had a vision of a man called Ananias laying hands on his eyes.

Once his sight is restored, Paul proceeds to the far side of his three-day threshold, eats, regains his strength, hangs out with disciples, and then begins a new life, preaching in the synagogues of Damascus that Jesus is the Son of God.

Sometimes dwelling in the transition time, in that liminal space, that threshold can be really uncomfortable. The unknowing. The vulnerability. The wanting to control. The profound surrender. It’s all a part of the threshold journey.

The good news is that it doesn’t last forever. And the good news is that we are not alone in the midst of it: not only do we walk together as a congregation through the shadowy spaces of unknowing, God is with us every step of the way. And the good news is that we emerge from threshold spaces with new perspectives, with clear vision, and with renewed energy.

Will you pray with me?

Holy One, bless our congregation as we walk through lands that are unknown to us; even though it may be foreign territory for us, even this is not alien to you. Walk with us, work with us, dream with us, and call us, because we know you will inspire us to new and transforming visions. Amen.

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