

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Life changing experiences.

- We all have had them.....and I dare say, will continue to have them.
- They are significant.
- As the descriptor says—they are.....life changing!
- And, they can be good or bad.

They can be either physical or spiritual.

- But many times they are both.
- They go together.

Sometimes you can see them coming and even work towards them.

- Sometimes you have some control over them.
- Sometimes you don't. Sometimes they just happen.
- You don't even see it coming. Significantly and spontaneously.

Sometimes those life changing experiences have long term impacts.

- Sometimes they don't.
- And for each of those life changing experiences.....they can happen directly to you.....or you can be a contributor or factor in them for someone else.

Let me give you an example to illustrate what I am all talking about here.

- The young man and woman met each other.
- Their coming together was random but there was an immediate attraction.
- One thing led to another and they got married.
- It was a life changing experience.

There marriage continued on for a life time.

- Not all of them do.
- Each spouse was directly impacted by this and at the same time was a contributor to the experiences of the other.

And then suddenly one of them was called home. Taken from this world.

- Another life changing experience.

In all our time here on earth, there are many opportunities for life changing experiences—both directly to you and as a contributor to others.

- Some of them good, some of them perhaps not so good.
- And the question this morning is.....how do we deal with all those twists and turns and decision points, or as the metaphor goes, forks in the road?

Last Tuesday night Sandy and I had the joy, the privilege of attending the assignment service at Fort Wayne Seminary, where our own May Itcovitch received her deaconess assignment.

- If you have not heard, it was to Grace Lutheran Church and School in St. Petersburg, Florida.
- As May and each of the candidates, both deaconess, and vicars, received their assignments, I could not help but think about life changing experiences.

Both physical and spiritual.

- Each candidate will be moving to a new location where most of them have never been. Physical impacts.
- Going into full time church work with all the spiritual ramifications of that.

But as those assignments were made, I couldn't help but think that those decisions are not only life changing experiences for them; but for many others also.

- They will also be impacting the experiences of many others.
- For the congregations the candidates are going to, the comforting and strengthening offered and provided and accepted by members in times of need.....
- And, the coming to faith, the return to faith, or the growing in faith of those they come in contact with in their ministry.
- This all comes together as we interact with and impact and depend on one another.

As your pastor, it has not been lost on me the impact, the responsibilities, my being the undershepherd here at Hope has on each of our members.

- In June I will have been here 7 years.
- Seven years ago I received the call to Hope Lutheran Church, Granite City, Illinois.

I, and Sandy, have been directly impacted by this life changing experience.

- And we have impacted each of you in some of the life changing experiences you have had.

- I have seen some come to faith, some grow in faith, and unfortunately, some wander from our flock.
- In those 7 years I have joked with each of you, shared and reflected with each of you, played with each of you.....
- And I have been at the bedside of many of our members as they drew their last breath, I saw God call and take them home, and I then conducted their funeral service.

Unfortunately, sometimes the physical impacts of those life changing experiences last longer than the spiritual impacts.

- The student, young or old goes through junior confirmation or adult instruction.
- At the end of the classes, there is so much optimism and commitment.
- The pastor frequently hears the words.....I will be here every week. I will be active helping out however I can in the church.
- And then time goes by and we no longer see them.
- One month absence leads to 2 months, that leads to 6 months, and in some cases now, years of absence.

Or, the church member suddenly falls ill.

- They are in the hospital facing life changing, life threatening surgery.
- As the pastor, I go to visit them ahead of the surgery.
- They reflect on their life, their delinquency from church and they tell me that if God sees them through this surgery, they will be in church every week.
- The surgery goes well. Even a quick recovery.
- They are in church a few weeks, but the spiritual ramifications from their health issues do not seem to last. And once again we do not see them in church.

Or, one more example, there is a funeral.

- The service is over and the pastor is sitting with the family reflecting on things.
- The family expresses the need to get back to church. That is even what mom or dad, or grandma or grandpa would have wanted.
- Once again, they are in church for a few weeks, but somehow the spiritual impacts of that life changing experience does not last as long as the physical impacts.
- Luther called these times, “milk faith.”

Life changing experiences.

- How can we handle them?
- How do we get through them and even make them positive experiences, especially spiritual.....for each of us.

No matter where you are at in your walk with Christ, all of this has impacts on you.

- Both directly and indirectly.
- You will face life changing experiences and you will need help getting through them.
- And you will be called to help others through them also.

And most important in all this, moving forward positively, spiritually.

- This all has ramifications for each of us, this all applies to every scenario, no matter where you are at.
- Most certainly for the one who is converted and becomes a follower of Christ.
- It can be for the one who has wandered from the flock one time, two times, ten times, a 100 times and now again is returning to Christ.
- The conversion process to return to Christ the first time is the same as the 100<sup>th</sup> time.
- And for those in faith and walking with Christ, using these life changing experiences to draw ever closer to Him.....directly or indirectly as you impact others.

Today, in our first reading we have an account of a life changing experience with all the spiritual ramifications both directly to the individual and for others.

- The conversion of Saul to Paul
- We can learn much from this today about life changing experiences both for each of us as individuals and a contributor to the experience of others.

So we have Saul.

- A pharisee of pharisees.
- His life being around the same time as Christ's here on earth; but a persecutor of Christians.
- Saul as a good pharisee, is strictly following the Law.
- Trusting in himself. Saving himself. Handling things himself.
- In essence—it is by myself and not Christ that I am saved.

The first time we meet Saul he is guarding the garments as the church leaders are stoning the first New Testament Christian martyr, Stephen.

- And Saul is now on his way to Damascus.
- He has gotten the approval and authority of the High Priest to persecute Christians.
- To arrest them and return them to Jerusalem.
- Saul is in rebellion and rejection to Jesus.

And on the way, Jesus comes to him.

- It is always Jesus who comes to us.
- Saul didn't know it yet, but he was about to have a life changing experience.
- Jesus is clearly showing him that he cannot do it on his own.

We are told Saul fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

- And then Saul asked who are you?
- An answer was given, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city and you will be told what you are to do."

Saul then rose from the ground and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing.

- Saul was in the midst of a life changing experience.
- Physically he could not see.
- Spiritually he was being made to see.
- And we are told they led Saul by the hand and brought him to Damascus. And for 3 days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Remember we said that with life changing experiences, they can happen directly to you.....or you can be a contributor or factor in them for someone else.

- And so we are introduced to Ananias. A Christian man.
- And we are told the Lord said to Ananias, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas you will find a man named Saul."
- "And he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."

Uh oh. That is going to be tough.

- You see, Saul has a reputation. He is known to be a persecutor of Christians.
- And it is known that he has come to Damascus to arrest and persecute Christians.
- And you want me to go to him????

Life changing experiences.

- How can we handle them?
- How do we get through them and even make them positive experiences.....for each of us.

But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine to carry My name before the Gentiles. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of My name."

- You see, this life changing experience we are talking about here is impacting the lives of us Gentiles also.
- So Ananias departed and entered the house.
- And laying his hands on him said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.”
- And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight.
- Then he rose and was baptized, and taking food he was strengthened.

And at the end of our reading today we are told, “Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.”

- Jesus was the Christ.

That same Jesus who had some life changing experiences for us.

- That same Jesus who was mightily tempted in the wilderness but kept the Law perfectly. Something we could not do so He took our place.
- That same Jesus who on Maundy Thursday gave to us the Lord’s Supper.
- That same Jesus who went willingly to the cross to sacrifice Himself for you and me.
- That same Jesus who said, “It is finished.” So that the price was paid in full and we can have forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God.
- That same Jesus who rose from the tomb on Easter morning, and in so doing, gave a life changing experience to even death itself.

Life changing experiences.

- How can we handle them?
- How do we get through them and even make them positive experiences.....for each of us.

Well, if we listen to the world, YOU have to take the bull by the horns, YOU have to take control of your life, and make it happen.

- Worldly thinking puts forth.....
- You can do it. I believe in you.
- Encouragement is good, but that by itself falls so short of the mark.
- Pride gets in the way of all this.
- And truth be told, we cannot do it.

But Jesus turns that all around.

- He tells us.....

- You CANNOT DO IT. Believe in ME.

Just as Saul who became Paul could not do it on his own, neither can we.

- Just as Ananias, could never have witnessed to Saul and served as the means God's used to convert Saul to Paul, we cannot do it either.
- And we cannot come to faith, remain in faith, and grow in faith on our own either.

We have and will continue to face, directly and indirectly many life changing experiences.

- None of us can do it on our own.
- But we can with Christ.
- And in this Eastertide, live in that joy that, confidence, that strength of our risen Lord.....who has done it all and has changed your life.

You have had a life changing experience in Holy Baptism.

- You will have opportunity this day for a life changing experience in Holy Communion.
- No matter if you are new to the faith, if you have wandered from the faith and need to return to Christ, or you have faith but continually looked for it to be strengthened.....
- Live in Christ. Trust in Him.
- And your life here on this earth will be changed into life eternal, face to face with Him in a restored creation for all eternity.
- The greatest and best life changing experience that you can have and it will last forever.
- Amen.

(Please stand) And now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Having heard the Word of God, we now prepare our hearts and minds to say together the words of the Nicene Creed as found on page 158 in your hymnal.