

# ***Transforming Moments***

Luke 3:15-22

Certain moments in our lives define us, individually and collectively. They mark our memories, they shape our stories, and they characterize who we are as people.

Defining moments are milestones that enable us to describe who we are—sometimes for the better, sometimes not. If you look back on your life to this point, it's very likely you would recite your biography in terms of various significant events, e.g., where and when you were born, where you went to school, if you served in the military, marriages and births, career opportunities and job losses, perhaps achievements and failures, maladies and mishaps, divorces and deaths, and on and on and on—milestones that serve to describe who you are over the course of your years. Like scene changes in a play, our stories are largely portrayed by what happens where we are at a particular time.

In a similar way, historians (professional or armchair variety) appreciate how much the public world is shaped by defining moments of one type or another. At times larger-than-life events impact us with sudden cultural or political change (e.g., Dec. 7, 1941; Sept. 11, 2001); or sometimes they merely capture and reflect our evolutionary development as a society (e.g., the day the first automobile or personal computer were launched). Part of living through history is debating how much certain things simply define us as people, or if events actually transform us toward significant and meaningful change. In other words, are these milestones in our common history defining moments or transforming moments?

Over the last month many have wondered if the tragedy in Newtown would ultimately serve as a watershed moment—not only in terms of national grief, but also in terms of how much violence we will tolerate as a society before something is done to address it. Will the mass casualty crimes of the last six months simply define us as an unrepentant nation of violent people, or will it propel us toward significant and meaningful change—will this be a wake-up call to do something about it? Will those a century from now look upon our lifetime and judge whether our responses to current events changed our society and culture or whether they merely epitomized it, for better or for worse? In other words, will Newtown come to *define* us as a society or will it *transform* us?

It's probably too soon to know for certain. It could go either way. It could be both, reflecting the deep divisions within our country. The point is, at least for some, the period we are currently in may turn out to be a life-changing moment in history that will reshape the direction and commitments they make as individuals and groups. Transformational change is what forces us to think outside of the box, to refuse to surrender to the status quo, and to reject the conventional wisdom and reference points and whatever has defined “normalcy” for us, especially if maintaining the status quo has only steered us toward an alarming crisis. As history will attest, transforming moments (if indeed they are such) are the precipitating events that propel people toward rethinking how they're living, where they're heading, and what they're doing that has brought them to a moment of crisis—a crisis that overwhelms them with the realization

that something in their life and world has to change and that it's time to step up to the challenge and make it happen.

Years ago, Princeton theologian, James Loder, wrote a book<sup>1</sup> I often return to providing perspective on what happens within people when they experience transforming moments in their lives. He was examining personal transformations more than societal ones, but he brought together the disciplines of psychology, spirituality, theology, and philosophy to explore the power of convictional experiences on people—"metanoia" moments when they are transformed to be something different than they presently are. In part of the book, he drew upon the example of the Apostle Paul's own transformation story on the road to Damascus—depicted as the great reversal of his life from actively persecuting the early Jesus movement to eventually becoming one of its strongest proponents and notable leaders—a dramatic illustration of one whose religious and spiritual reference points radically changed.

Loder described the process which people typically go through, beginning with a crisis that brings their world to a sudden stop—a crisis that forces them to face fundamental conflicts within their own expressed values or expectations, a crisis that requires them to see things in a new way, that shakes up the old story and begins within them a new narrative. In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, Loder explains, there is a soul-searching that goes on as people come to terms with their emotional reactions and stubborn perceptions. Then they have to wrestle through the implications of having to reexamine what has been known to them and what is familiar in light of what

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<sup>1</sup> James Loder, *The Transforming Moment*, Harper & Row, 1981.

new insights and knowledge challenge and alter their accustomed worldview. This can go either way. A person may reject the new and it then becomes for them a defining moment—epitomizing their present beliefs and perspectives. Or they may accept the new insights and begin to integrate them into their worldview, eventually leading to a personal transformation with significant change in their thinking and living patterns. People experience radical changes of this sort on a variety of levels (e.g., relationally, with diets and health, vocationally, spiritually and religiously, etc.).

Eventually, this transformation leads to a new alignment of values and priorities as they integrate all of this into their thinking and self-awareness. Again, those moments of crisis can either define people by the causes of the conflict, or they can be transformed by the experience as they learn from it and resolve the clash of core values within them—what’s right versus what’s wrong, what’s just or unjust, what’s true and what’s not, etc. This is how Loder understood the Apostle Paul’s spiritual transformation—a conversion of values more than one based solely in religion. More often than not, the transforming moments any of us experience in life are due to a conversion in our values and a change in priorities.

It may be what many people are beginning to experience in the wake of Newtown. We’ve tolerated for so long the rise of violence in our society, in part because we have considered constitutional freedoms and liberties as extremely important, if not sacrosanct, to what it means to be an American. But now many are starting to reconsider this, especially if the freedom to possess firearms supersedes the safety of innocent people. Of course, reasonable

discussions are necessary to work through the competing concerns and interests—partisan extremism won't work—for there are legitimate values raised on all sides of the gun debate. Even as a constitutional matter, whether or not we own firearms, it still comes down to being a question of what values do we consider more important for our survival and stability as a society—what's of greater universal interest—which is why this debate may impact us more than we realize. Unlike most of the recent political crazy-making in America, the tragedy at Newtown is forcing us to make choices over our basic core values as people living in a free society. In that light, it could well be a transforming moment for many of us.

Now to bring all of this back to our text for today, what I find intriguing is this is what I believe Jesus and the story of his baptism is all about; namely, a conversion of values and a resetting of priorities, all occurring within a transforming moment in his own life. In fact, I would propose that the story of Jesus' baptism and the bestowal of the Spirit wasn't meant to merely be an affirmation of who he was (as it has been classically interpreted); instead I believe it was a sign of his spiritual transformation that likely occurred in a moment of personal crisis, and that it was even another later existential crisis that propelled him to launch his ministry in Galilee—what we have now as the gospel story. Perhaps I'm coloring a bit outside of the lines of traditional Christian theology, but as I imagine the setting, it all makes perfect sense to me. So let me suggest a context for how this episode may have played out in Jesus' life as a transforming moment.

As Luke tells us in the verse following our passage, Jesus was around thirty-years-old when he began his work. Now that is not an insignificant detail. For us, it might seem as if he was entering the prime of his life. However, in first century Palestine, thirty years was well into one's "senior" years. Over half of the population didn't survive three decades. So Luke's point is that it was relatively late in life when Jesus embarked on his ministry. He was closer to the status of an elder than of a young man.

So what did Jesus do prior to his baptism? By all indications, he was a woodworker in Nazareth. Without any mention of being married or his father, Joseph, we fill in the gaps by presuming that Jesus was the head of the household in place of his father—that his father must have died even before the age when he would have arranged a marriage for his firstborn (which would have been when Jesus was in his mid-to-late teens). If that's true, according to custom, Jesus, as oldest son, would have inherited his father's role and responsibility for his family's welfare; by age thirty, he would have done this already close to half of his lifetime. For those of his advanced age, that then would be their lot in life—to watch over their family and take care of their father's household.

If this is a fair representation of Jesus' life, imagine the spiritual turmoil he would have sensed, wondering where his intuited call and relationship with God was leading him, listening perhaps with frustration to synagogue leaders in his hometown who were probably more concerned about maintaining religious traditions than addressing the great injustices in society. For one who must have felt a different call to destiny, we presume somewhere in his late twenties

came the tipping point: Jesus became intrigued and influenced by John's prophetic ministry, particularly his radical call for Judean society to change—to be transformed from its current state as an occupied territory of Rome, with its corruption, systemic injustice, and pluralistic culture. As a reformer, John was calling his people back to their spiritual and moral roots in tribal Israel. It was a call to repentance—to change their world from the direction it was headed. That radical message apparently spoke to many people's hearts, including Jesus' own.

I can well imagine Jesus was in a crisis of his own making, as following John meant he had to leave his birth family (for which he was legally and morally responsible). This was not a youthful impulse; it was an existential crisis later in his life that tested his willingness to break ties with those he loved in order to do the work he must. Perhaps, for Jesus, his baptism signified a transforming moment when he broke from his well-ordered life and took the risk to fulfill his destiny. His could have even been a baptism of repentance, if it were based in the conflicts he may have felt within himself—to serve his family or to follow John's example and serve God in the world (maybe even a personal repentance because it took so long for him to finally be willing to leave).

If that's true, it very well could have taken significant time for Jesus to go through this process of discernment of where his life was headed. Transforming moments take time to play out because of the wholesale changes that are required. Luke actually suggests that it was after his baptism, not during (as the other Gospel writers suggest), when Jesus felt the anointing and affirmation of God to

begin his ministry—when the Spirit of God came upon him like a dove.

Why might it be then? Well, it may have had to do with another crisis, i.e., the arrest of John by Herod. Look at the details of the story. It was after John's arrest and imprisonment that Jesus struck out on his own. John's departure from the scene could have catapulted Jesus toward another transforming moment, namely, not just to follow John, but to pick up the prophet's mantle and take up where John left off.

In both of those experiences, I sense it was the tug of God that was compelling Jesus to move forward toward this radical change in his life and in his world. It was a life-changing moment for him. His personal world would be dramatically altered, to the chagrin of his mother and siblings, as the Gospel texts often suggest. His gospel message became a projection of his own personal deliverance: God was beginning the transformation of the world through him—a new day of Jubilee—of re-ordering the familial world, of restoring the poor to their land, of release to the captives, of recovery of sight to the blind, of freedom for the oppressed. Jesus may have seen his own life reflected in Isaiah's great promise of liberation. His message of the coming realm of God may have been in light of his own personal transformation to leave his private life and become a servant for God in the public world. It was time to challenge the powers that be with the core values of his faith and his developing self-consciousness as a prophet of God!

I imagine it this way based on the impact of transforming moments—they change you, they propel you to another level in life;

they help clarify your thinking and direction and the reasons why you must change as an individual and as a society. Crises don't have to define you; they can transform you, if you respond by being changed for the better because of them. Divinely-inspired transforming moments lead us to become more congruent with our core values and God's intentions for humanity.

For that reason, I wonder if we are experiencing a transforming moment in our own country. I, for one, sense the need to be more congruent with my core values and faith in light of the Newtown tragedy. It's not enough for me to simply shake my head and complain about the violence in the world. Something must be done. I trust I'm not alone. Maybe our society will change as a result of what has happened. Maybe we won't tolerate, justify, or validate violence and the access to deadly weapons quite as much as we have in the past. Maybe it's not a constitutional issue, but more a matter of values.

Honestly, I'm not afraid to color outside of the lines on this one. I think we all need to. If this moment in time truly does transform us, we may all discover that the changes we experience could be what ultimately save us.

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