

The One True Constant

by Rob Jones

I want to take an informal poll before we begin. Please raise your hand if you have ever heard the saying, "The only constant in the world is, change?" This phrase is popular among pseudo-philosophers and Ad campaign managers. It has always fascinated me. Superficially, it seems to be a universal truth; the world is constantly changing, and we are also continually changing. So, the one constant is "change," coming at us from all directions, always, forever. In our Old Testament reading, we read about the change Moses experiences. Listen for the changes that occur in our New Testament reading as well.

Old Testament Reading Exodus 34:29-35

²⁹Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³²Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again until he went in to speak with him.

New Testament Reading Luke 9:28-36 (37-43)

²⁸Now, about eight days after these sayings, Jesus took with him Peter and John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" — not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then, from the cloud, came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" ³⁶When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and, in those days, told no one any of the things they had seen. ³⁷On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸Just then, a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. ³⁹Suddenly, a spirit seizes him, and all at once, he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. ⁴⁰I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." ⁴¹Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." ⁴²While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ⁴³And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

"The only constant is change" paraphrases a Greek philosopher named Heraclitus of Ephesus. He is thought of as the father of *Change Philosophy*. Most of his work has been lost to time. There is no book directly attributed to him except a few fragmental sayings that have survived from his time, 500 years before Jesus' life and ministry. Plato and later Aristotle quote and keep his legacy alive. Today I want us to

look at and think about change and what it means for us as individual people, as a collective species, and most importantly, as Christians.

At the age of thirteen, I changed. I do not mean the regular changes that happen around that age. I am talking about self-awareness that is not typical of adolescence. I wanted to know the big picture, answers to the question, "why." This led to circumstances that have ultimately led me into Ministry; I began by reading the classics and the Bible. I read Plato (or what was most likely a simplified translation), and I came across the *change philosophy* idea. As a kid, this idea seemed like a no-brainer, and as a cocky 13-year-old, I thought to myself, "this philosophy stuff is simple." (I would later learn in high school and college just how mistaken I was). But "change" had begun, and there was no turning back. I would later conclude that the idea of change as a constant doesn't allow for the way God designed the universe.

This is not often preached in pulpits, but modern science shows us that Heraclitus and Plato speak only of the observable. Their version of science was talking about what they see in nature. Likewise, our science, when you get down into the nuts and bolts of it, although way more advanced, only shows us how God programmed the universe. Constant, unchangeable, mathematical ratios determine how flowers unfold, how and when rain falls, what makes a crystal or a diamond form in nature. Yes, on the surface, things change, but the universe is ordered, and according to science, "order" cannot appear from chaos unless some force acts upon that chaos. In philosophical terms, the constant change we see is caused by something, which is caused by something, so forth, and so on.

Now I know that I am nerding out on you but follow me. As I tried to change my understanding of the world away from what I called my grandmother's way of thinking, God changed me by showing me a new, more developed sense of creation. After a couple of years of reading Plato and Aristotle (or, like I said, simplified versions), along with reading the Bible and trying to understand how this stuff is connected, I came across Aristotle's idea of "*the original mover*." Aristotle argues, in his books on *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, "...there must be an immortal, unchanging being, ultimately responsible for all wholeness and orderliness in the sensible world". He called it "that which moves without being moved," or the original mover. We know this as our creator God.

One exciting thing about being a seminary student is that I learned that Aristotle and Plato were trying to define *WHAT* God is and *HOW* God works, much like our modern science does. But when we read scripture, there is something else going on. We see *WHY* God does what God does.

If change is understood as the result of a cause, and God is the first mover, causer is you will. Then we should look at an example of God changing something, more importantly, one of the first examples of change. Humankind is a creation of God. The Hebrew word we transliterate as Adam is, in Hebrew understanding, the broad terminology for humans. It is derived from the Hebrew word *Adamah* which means earth. Thus, the *Adam (man, or human)* comes from the *Adamah (Earth, or dirt)*. God took something good and made something else, which in turn God said that all that had been made was very good. God doesn't just change things; God doesn't just change people; God transforms the good into very good. This transformation can be seen through different eyes (philosophical, scientific, or theological). Each lens can, and will, interpret what God does in creation to fit their understanding. However, I am reminded of my grandmother's wisdom concerning her overly curious grandson; she would tell me, "Jesus will meet you where you are," as she would recite the KJV of Luke 11:9, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you." I was well into a transformation, and God was the instigator.

Transformation is defined as a complete or dramatic change in form or appearance. Transformation is a superficial or aesthetic change, like when you have a landscaper come and make your yard fancy-looking; it may look better, but it's still a yard. When God does it, whether it is making humans from dirt or making Moses' face shine, we enter another level of change. When God changes someone, it is the very essence of "transfiguration." **God's glory is a force that changes something on a molecular**

level. It is the overwhelming force of God's very existence, which, if Moses had seen full-on, would have killed him (remember, God never faces Moses to protect him from the full brunt of God's presence). Listen again to what happens to Moses. "*As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.*" The Hebrew verb *Ka-ran* translated as shone, is a verb in its perfect state. Now what that means in lay terms is that it glowed constantly. Light emitted from the face of Moses after he would speak to God. It was so bright and scary that he had to cover his face when addressing the Hebrew people. God's mere presence transfigured Moses' skin, giving it a bioluminescent quality. That's cool.

Likewise, in the New Testament reading, Jesus' human form is transfigured. While Jesus was praying, his appearance changed: his face and clothes. God's presence, portrayed by the cloud covering the mountain top, fills the area where Jesus, Peter, John, and James are. But that's not the only thing. Moses and Elijah also appeared, speaking to Jesus. We are told they appeared in *glory*. In the Greek understanding of glory, it is associated with brightness. This could be a reference that not only was Jesus transfigured by the presence of God, the Holy Spirit, represented by the cloud, but Moses and Elijah were also transfigured. They were in the presence of God, the Holy Spirit, and God the Son. Then Luke records the full scale of this event. ³⁵*Then, from the cloud, came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"* God the Father speaks, just like when Jesus was baptized. I would argue that being in the presence of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit might change you. Don't you think?

Paul would later reference the power of God's presence in 2 Corinthians. He speaks about the veil that Moses had to wear because of being in the presence of God's glory and how Jesus in the gospels is a reflection of that same glory. Even so, Jesus reflecting God's glory is still powerful. He says, ¹⁷"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:17-18) If we see only a reflection of God's glory in the gospel and the Spirit is still capable of changing our lives, think about how powerful it must have been to be Moses or Jesus and those disciples during their time in God's presence.

The transfiguration of Jesus might be the second most important part of Luke's gospel. Of course, the passion narrative is the most important and takes more room than any other story in every gospel. However, the transfiguration brings all the elements to bear for the Gospel. Think about it. The Old Testament is represented through Moses (the law and salvation of the Hebrew people) and Elijah (the greatest of the prophets, who pushed against the status quo, and who didn't taste death because he ascended into heaven alive as Jesus will after his resurrection), and what we call the triune God, creator of it all, is presently representing New Testament and the fulfillment of the law in Jesus' ministry. For Christians, especially for us, that claim a trinitarian belief, here is the passage one can look to, study, and say, "yep, it's all right there!"

Finally, I want to look at the implications of transfiguration. In theological understandings, transfiguration makes something more holy, better spiritually, something worthy of sanctification. In my simple version of this, when we claim our baptism and when we follow the teachings of Jesus. When we worship and pray in the name of Christ Jesus, and when we act as the body of Christ. When we do all the things that separate us and make us holy before God, even as flawed as we are still, it is because God has changed our hearts, given us new eyes to see, new ears to hear, by calling us into the blessing we are to be.

How has God changed you? Where, when, and how did it happen? Are you still changing, evolving as a Christian? Do you strive to discern the will of God through prayer and study? Heraclitus was wrong; Change is not the only constant because the One True Constant is the cause of all change in the universe. The one true constant is God and God alone. I will close out with a quote from Isaiah 40:6-8, ⁶"A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' All people are grass; their constancy is like the flower of

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the field. ⁷The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”

In the of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen