

Back when I was in the fourth grade, I had a great year. My teacher at school, Mrs. Gustafson, was amazing. I made friends with a new kid who had just emigrated from Poland. I really felt like I was on top of my schoolwork and I was actually enjoying my life, for once. But then, disaster struck.

The name of my particular disaster was “The Fifth Grade.” I didn’t like my new teacher. My friend from Poland got placed in another class. The schoolwork was way harder than it had been the year before. I was miserable.

But then, I had an absolutely *genius* idea. “If I’m not happy where I am,” I thought, “then I should go back to the last place where I was happy.” So, I went to see my school’s guidance counselor, Mr. Arnold, to share my genius idea.

“I don’t think I’m ready for fifth grade,” I said, “so I think I need to go back to fourth grade and do it all over again.”

Mr. Arnold, if you can believe it, did not find my idea as brilliant as I did. In fact, he laughed so hard he almost fell out of his chair. I was puzzled.

“You’re not going back to fourth grade,” he said, “you’ve already done that. You did well. You graduated. And I hear you when you say that this year has been rough, but believe me when I tell you: you are ready for this challenge. Going backward is not the answer.”

Growing up is hard, but going backward is not the answer.

I want to invite you to think of a time in your life when you faced a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. What parts of you wished you could go back to the way things used to be? In what ways did you want to just give up on this new challenge and stick with the old problems that felt comfortable and familiar? How did you react when you realized that going backward was not an option, so the only thing to do was to keep putting one foot in front of the other?

That’s how I imagine the early Christians felt in the time when Matthew wrote his gospel. The people to whom Matthew was writing were scared because they had just been excommunicated as heretics by the leaders of their religious tradition. Some of them probably wondered whether this whole “Jesus the Messiah” thing had been a big mistake and they should go back to practicing the faith of their ancestors, as it had been taught to them.

Matthew's point, as you heard me say in my last few sermons, is to demonstrate how the movement that Jesus started stands in continuity with traditional Judaism. But he also points out the ways in which this Jesus movement is a step forward into a new way of understanding the faith of their ancestors.

The early Christians were branded as heretics because they had the audacity to proclaim they had experienced something, through this person Jesus, that had never been seen before. The God of their ancestors, they said, had somehow become embodied in a human being. In Christ, the immediate presence of God could be seen, heard, and felt. The early Jews and Christians had no theological category for this kind of experience. Some rejected it as heresy while others accepted it as mysterious truth.

The story of the Transfiguration, which we heard in today's reading from Matthew's gospel, tells us about a time when Jesus' first followers get a brief glimpse of the divinity that flows through him. For just a moment, the veil of this world is pulled back and the disciples witness things as they really are. Through his conversation with Moses and Elijah, Jesus stands in dialogue with the Torah and

prophets of Jewish tradition. By the light that radiates from within him, Jesus represents a new revelation of divine glory that leads the tradition into places it has never been before.

The early followers of Jesus realized that this new experience of God in Christ would certainly make people uncomfortable, but they also realized that going backward was not the answer. In this way, they were a bit like the famous scientist Galileo, who used his telescope to prove that the Earth is not the center of the universe. The ecclesiastical authorities in 1633 forced Galileo to sign an official denial of his findings, although the mounting evidence eventually led the Vatican to apologize and admit that Galileo had been right... in the year 1992.

New experiences can sometimes make us feel uncomfortable, when they go against our previously conceived notions of reality, but experience itself shows that, if we can open our minds, we will find ourselves in awe of an expanding universe whose creativity exceeds our wildest expectations. The scientific word for this is, “emergence.”

Physicists tells us that, in the first few seconds after the Big Bang, only the most basic elementary particles existed. Almost 400,000

years later, the first stable atoms began to form. Sometime after that, those atoms collided to form molecular bonds, making chemistry possible for the first time. 9 billion years after that, on this planet anyway, complex chemical reactions stabilized in a way that allowed single-celled life to form. This was the beginning of biology. And then, about a billion years ago, those single-celled organisms figured out how to work together so well that they formed complex beings with specialized nervous systems and brains. And then, in the last 2 million years, those brains became advanced enough to develop psychological self-awareness in the form of human beings.

With each new level of emergence, from physics to chemistry to biology to psychology, the universe gave birth to new ways of relating that were previously impossible and even inconceivable. No one could have predicted, at the beginning of time, how the elementary particles of the universe would one day take the shape of human beings with names like “Barrett” and “Karen.”

This is how the creativity of God works: Constantly leading us out of our narrow-but-familiar comfort zones and into new levels of experience. Faith, in this expanding and complexifying universe, is

about trusting in the creative process, even when (especially when) our experience of that creative process challenges our preconceived notions about reality.

The first followers of Jesus understood this. They realized that their experience of divinity in the person of Christ would change their idea of God forever. They knew that this experience would get them excommunicated from their religious tradition. Yet, they continued to trust in their experience of Jesus because they knew, as Mr. Arnold once told me, that going backward is not the answer.

Well, as it turns out, Mr. Arnold was right. Going back to fourth grade was not the answer for me. The rest of fifth grade continued to be pretty rough, but I got through it and kept moving forward. The years to come presented me with new challenges. Sometimes, I admit, I felt like giving up again but I kept putting one foot in front of the other and got through those challenges too. Along the way, I met new teachers I loved, made new friends, and got to learn things that set my mind and heart on fire in ways I would have missed, had I spent the rest of my life in the fourth grade.

When you look at your life, in what ways do you sometimes feel like going back to the way things used to be? What seemingly insurmountable challenges are in front of you today that make you want to give up and stick with the old and familiar ways of being? I won't deny that it feels scary, because I sometimes feel scared about it too.

I want to invite you, as you face these challenges, to remember the words that my guidance counselor once told me: Going backward is not the answer. I want to encourage you with the image of Peter, James, and John with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. God revealed something new through Jesus that had never been seen before. It changed the world in ways that we still don't fully understand. Keep trusting in this creative process and follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who leads you down this mountain and into a bigger world that shines a little brighter than it did before.