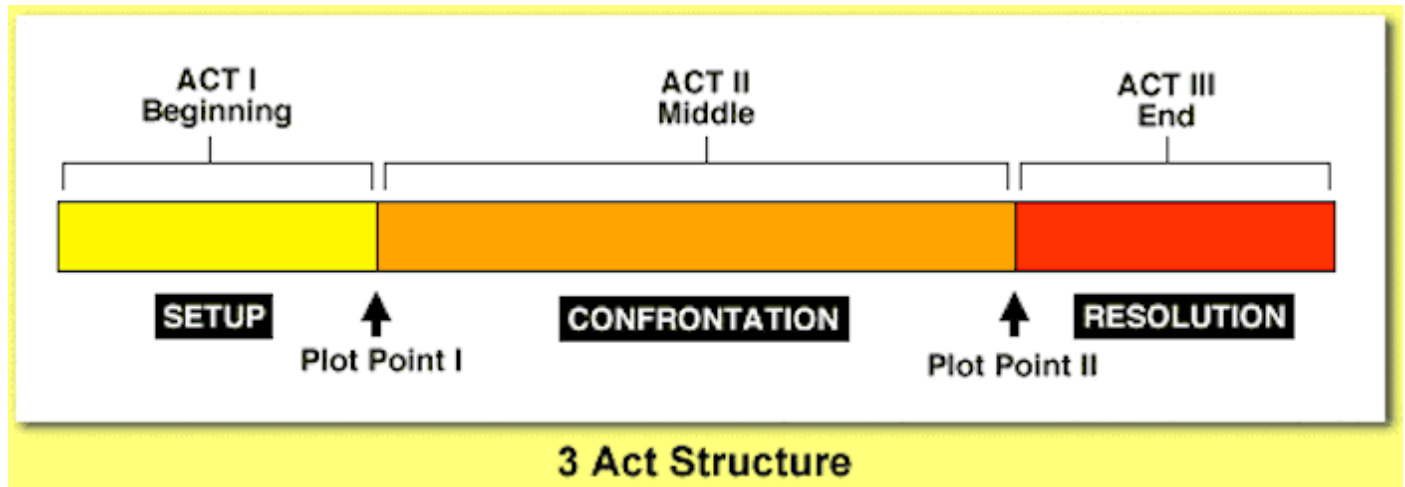


The Three Acts of Spiritual Transformation

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Preaching on:

Mark 10:17–31

2,300 years ago, Aristotle said that every good story needs to have three things: a beginning, a middle, and an end. As in drama, so in life. And in our scripture reading this morning there's a whole lot about beginnings, middles, and endings. Jesus talks specifically about how and where we get stuck in (what I'm calling) the three acts of spiritual transformation.

Now, all my procrastinators—where are my procrastinators at? We all know that getting started is the hardest part, right? Especially if it's a big project, especially if it's going to require some sort of conflict or change or pain in my life, it's easy to find something else to do for a little while—or maybe even for years. It's easy to get stuck before we even really begin.

But anyone who's ever walked out of a movie halfway through, or put down a novel 100 pages in and never picked it back up again knows that it's the second act (in stories and in life) where things most often get bogged down—where we lose hope that the path we're on is going to be worth whatever payoff the ending might hold for us.

And as anyone who's ever tried to get back into shape knows—that first mile of that first jog—man!—I feel great; I'm like 20-years old out there! That second mile—my body starts flailing and shaking like a middle-aged body. And somewhere around that third mile, I get a cramp, and I just lie right down. Right? Sometimes, even with the finish line in sight, we can still fall down and give up. Sometimes, the

final mile is the hardest one. So, in a spiritual journey, in our walk with God, what's it like getting stuck at the beginning, the middle, and the end, and how do we get unstuck?

Now, I can't imagine a better image for getting stuck at the beginning of something than trying to squeeze a camel through the eye of a needle: the biggest, humpiest, stubbornest thing you can think of trying to go through the smallest opening you've ever seen. If I brought you a camel and a needle, and I said, "Get to work!" you'd have to be nuts to even try. And nobody's ever going to bring you a camel halfway through the eye of a needle and say, "Well, I gave it my best shot, but I just can't figure this thing out." Jesus intentionally chooses an image that is impossible—that no sane person would even attempt.

Maybe you've had some experience in your life, some task, some project, some problem, some dream that you just couldn't imagine ever succeeding at, so you never even tried in the first place. Back when I was a little baby minister, when it came time for me to apply to seminary, I was doing everything but applying to seminary because I was afraid. I was afraid I wouldn't get in, and then what would that mean for the purpose of my life and the fulfillment of my calling? That's terrifying. What if I fail? And I let that terror dissuade me from applying for months. I had to get over it. I had to believe it was possible.

In the first act of spiritual transformation—of making positive change in your life and becoming who God is calling you to become—we get stuck because we believe in the impossible more than we believe in the possible. All our problems all look like camels and our solutions all look like needles. Every new beginning, every first step toward positive change in our lives, in a psychological sense, is breaking through this unbreakable barrier—it's overcoming the impossible and reclaiming your faith in the idea that God has plans for you that are undeniable—you can't get away from them, you can't impossibilize your way out of them.

How do we do that? When we're stuck at the impossible beginning how do we make the impossible possible? When they hear Jesus tell them about the camel and the needle, even the disciples, who are usually numbskulls and always getting everything wrong, get their first response right: They're shocked, and they ask, "Who then can be saved?" Can I shrink my camel? Can I make the needle bigger? Can I find a trick, a workaround? Can it be done? No, says Jesus, it is impossible. But, luckily for us, everything is possible for God.

I've been lucky to have a number of friends and congregants over the years who have been in recovery from addiction who went through the twelve steps. The twelve steps take this reality seriously. Just listen to the first three steps (designed to get you from an impossibly stuck to actually starting):

1. *We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.*
2. *We came to believe that a Powergreater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*
3. *We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.*

Jesus and the twelve steps are in total agreement—if you get stuck somewhere at the beginning, admit that you're stuck. And if you can admit you're stuck and if you can then offer up your mortal-impossible to be touched by God's possibility, then you will no longer be stuck. And isn't this Jesus' whole way of doing things? The path to true power must be routed through powerlessness. You have started down the path of spiritual transformation. You're following God now into the second act.

You know the disciples are in the second act of their journey at this point, and what we know about them is that they're always looking away—to the future, to the horizon. Never their minds on where they are, on what they are doing. The disciples are continually arguing about who is the greatest or asking to be seated at Jesus' right hand in the coming Kingdom. And here they go again. Peter now says, "Well, hold on. You know, the twelve of us did leave everything behind to follow you, we achieved the impossible! We want to be recognized! We want to be rewarded! We want to know that the sacrifices we made to get to this boggy middle, this swampy second act are going to pay off in the end! Otherwise, maybe we just get up and leave the theater."

That's what getting stuck in the second act looks like. We want to be carried along by what the poet Rilke called, "the winged energy of delight." After all, this is a spiritual journey, and shouldn't a spiritual journey feel as sleek and fulfilling as a wellness lifestyle Instagram account? Juice cleanses, and yoga, and #blessed? But "the winged energy of delight" must always transform. And it transforms in the second act. And it turns into work. It turns into hard work, or else you get stuck expecting someone else (human or divine) to carry you along and do your work for you. But it's *your* work. Transformation cannot occur without sacrifice. And the most common sacrifice we must make for our own spiritual journey is our own hard work. As Rilke says, "Miracles become miracles in the clear achievement that is earned."

And so Jesus decides to play a little trick. Jesus promises the disciples, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold **NOW** *in this age*--houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields.... *with persecutions*--and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

It's a statement so baffling that the disciples don't even respond. Maybe they realize they're being made fun of. Jesus lays out this fairytale ending that he doesn't really believe and then brings the roof down on the whole premise. And, certainly, the disciples never got a hundred children or a hundred fields or (ha, ha) a hundred mothers—how does that even work? But they did get that bucket of cold water in the face—a hundred persecutions. Their work got harder and harder with each passing day—not easier!

Someone I loved once did me a terrible wrong. I was heartbroken and angry and confused. That

betrayal led to some of the darkest days of my life. I wanted a spiritual transformation. Act 1 was no problem. Take it away! I don't want this pain! I don't want to dwell on this anymore. And God said, "Let's go. You know how to do it. You need to forgive." Can't you punish them, I asked? That would make me feel better! "No, this is your work. It's not about them, it's not about making you feel better. This is your work." Fine, I'll plan some revenge. But that made me feel worse. Take it away! "You have to forgive." They haven't even asked for forgiveness! "So what? Maybe they never will. This is your work. Only you can work this through. You've got to do your work."

Which brings us to the end of things and that rich man getting tripped up at the end of the race. Jesus doesn't say the rich man is a bad person. In fact, he's been following the commandments his whole life. "You lack one thing." One, final thing! Sell everything, give the proceeds to the poor, then come and follow me.

There's something about nearing the finish line—what's good for you and what most challenges you get closer and closer and closer until there's no difference between them. In act three we need to make the biggest changes, to take the greatest risks, to open ourselves up to our highest possibilities. And, again, that's not always going to feel nice. Sometimes it's gonna burn.

The realization that we need to cultivate here in the second act that will get us over that finish line of transformation is the realization that sometimes it's more painful (not less painful, more painful) to finally resolve a conflict than to simply endure it. Spiritual transformation is not about escaping our pain, it's about no longer avoiding our pain, so that the situation that could be uncomfortably endured forever is transformed through sacrifice, hard work, and acknowledging your pain, freeing you to become more fully who God is calling you to become. To get through the third act we must understand that bearing your cross is not an affront to your dignity, it's the transformation of sacrifice, labor, and pain into faith, hope, and love.

So, in the beginning, when we get stuck on the impossible, we turn to God who makes all things possible. In the middle, when we get stuck, it's usually time to get over ourselves, to stop fantasizing, to stop thinking God is going to do it all for us as a reward for simply wanting to change, and to get back to work. And when we're nearing the end, and we get stuck, we can get unstuck by accepting that there is no path to a bigger and better life, to a more just and peaceful world, that doesn't require us to sacrifice what we were for who we're hoping to become. At the end, if you're still holding on to what you were, you're still stuck at the very beginning.

Beloved, the good news is that wherever you are on life's journey, whatever you're struggling with, and wherever you're stuck, God is with you—squeezing that camel through the eye of the needle, calling you to labor as profoundly as you are loved, making every sacrifice a holy sacrifice. Because with God all things are possible.