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## **Sunday Sermon: “The Maelstrom”**

*Rev. Dr. Len De Roche*

About ten years ago, I became overwhelmed: I needed an operation, my first since tonsils and adenoids and a broken nose as a teen, which required 6 weeks recovery, my marriage had just come unraveled, my daughter in Arizona was having problems at her teaching job, a significant friend was suffering an undiagnosed illness that required an operation that could cure the problem, a few people at the church were dissatisfied with my ministry and were calling for my replacement, and my dog of eight years (Othello's mother) was pregnant by a rescue Lab that I brought into the house. I became significantly depressed. Now as a pastoral counselor I had seen many men in their midlife crisis get depressed, but I did not see my own developing. Realizing finally what was happening to me and that the stress of the job was exacerbating my health problems, I resigned. I listened to everyone and talked over what was happening to me. The idea of a maelstrom kept swirling through my mind as a metaphor of what had happened.

My story for the children today told about a maelstrom as a powerful whirlpool in the currents off the NW coast of Norway near the Lofoten Islands on the map in the front of the Order of Worship. But this word maelstrom has another meaning - a tumultuous state of affairs. Well, that's what I kept hearing in the reminiscing, both personally and organizationally, being in the maelstrom, in crisis, at life's point of changing or transition, at a tipping point, caught on the horns of a dilemma with choices that offer no win/win scenarios. But since I know this topic is not of interest to everyone, I will excuse anyone early to go for coffee, whose life has never been a maelstrom. This is anyone who has not, nor ever expects to have, a major debilitating accident or life threatening disease, or a problem with a relationship, a divorce, a friend or relative with an addiction to alcohol or drugs, the loss of a job, or a death of a loved one, or a friend or relative with a devastating mental disorder like dementia or depression or schizophrenia. You can leave now... Go ahead, this is your get out of church free card.

You notice there are not many leaving. To have a time of crisis in our lives is part of our human condition. But as many times as I have seen people in crisis, I am still amazed, not how horrible the real life crisis can be, but how some people get

through their massive problems so well. It certainly takes courage, lots of community, and family resources and the ability to change to manage the transition. This is personal crisis. The same adaptation exists in all organisms, like church communities. To have turmoil in an organization is part of its life also. The change of a minister can be a crisis in the life of a religious organization like this.

One explanation of the process that I like was presented by a University of Chicago anthropologist Victor Turner. Turner calls that transition period liminality and the period before the crisis, pre-liminal and time after the crisis has passed is called post-liminal. It is like my story of the maelstrom. The brothers entering the whirlpool have been a little fool-hardy, but they are just coasting through life; a young person's optimism that nothing can happen to them.

Then they have their time in chaos and the brother who escapes is then changed for the rest of his life. Michael Chicklis, the actor who became famous for his role in the Shield and most recently Vegas, once had a role that required that required him to shave his head and rather than powder it, he put on grease paint which killed all his hair follicles. It shaped all the parts he was able to play beyond that point; one little incident that effects a lifetime, one little act that becomes a transition period for the rest of life.

Being in personal chaos will always make a lasting impression on a person and in most cases change must occur in order to escape from the state of liminality. Something very significant occurs at these times. Think of your memories of when you were in liminality and remember (and if you were really in transition, you will remember what happened). Crisis, liminality, periods in the maelstrom are times of increased awareness, and you notice everything, every slight, every pain, every helping hand or push over the abyss. For those who have additions, it is hitting that low point where you decide to do something.

Your senses and your mind are working in overdrive. Robbie Walsh probably fell many times in his life, but the one we heard about in the reading made an impression on him enough that he wrote about it. For Robbie it was a time when he actually asked for help, that too is a transition.

If you remember the story of the Exodus of the Israelites as a metaphor for a people in transition we can understand how as a people the Israelites needed time to evolve into the Monotheistic Religion we know as Judaism. Most middle-east

traditions use myth and allegory as a way of expressing more universal truths. In the myth we see Moses leading the Israelites for forty years in the desert. They met many obstacles before they found the Promised Land. They needed to discover exactly who they were as a people before they were allowed to leave the desert. The Israelites had to develop their covenant with Yahweh and accept the laws. Personal crisis is like that. Community crisis is like that. In both as in the Hebraic myth you have to establish and identify relationships that will sustain you.

Whenever we enter a state of liminality we will have one of two basic reactions. The first is that we really don't have a problem, this is not as serious as everyone is making it out to be. This is what I initially did. Years ago there was a movie called the Blair Witch Project that made quite a stir for an amateur production. It made its impression because the characters were not admitting they were lost. They kept going on as if everything was just normal. One of the reasons that movie was such a success was that we viewers knew we would have behaved just like these characters and we see their dilemma and feel helpless to affect the outcome. Our problem as viewers is similar to when we watch our friends in chaos. We feel helpless to effect a change, to help our friends get out of chaos. My friends felt the same frustration watching me self-destruct. When we meet with friends in crisis we feel uncomfortable meeting and we hear ourselves saying, "I don't know what to say." At times we avoid contact because of this feeling of helplessness. Watching a friend with an addiction can be such an example.

In my life I kept on working long hours trying to satisfy all the demands I was putting on myself. I became less efficient, I began living, no existing, slovenly, I stopped exercising. My life went from work to walking my dogs, eating and sleeping. My friends told me I was getting depressed and reacting erratically. My dogs complained about too short a walk. I didn't see until it reached crisis and I was in the Maelstrom.

A second reaction that is common when a person enters a liminal state is to do nothing during a crisis short of waiting out the problem, also like I did. Many people take this approach when they find themselves in their desert. Do you know that when oysters are moved to different beds they will still move to the tides from the old place? It is the same with people; when we experience change we want to stay in the same old rhythm. This church is in a maelstrom, in transition. You are moving into a different era with a new settled minister and a new DRE. There are new needs that you members have and as we age that offer new needs that your

church community can supply, for example confronting the refugee issue and a deteriorating building with insufficient funds to correct everything that needs done.

Yet if the church body keeps circling the maelstrom as if nothing has changed, you will end with a church that is not relevant to 21st century needs. Friends, no church can return to what was the church of yesterday any more than you can return to your lives of years past. Staying the same is not an option. You can stay in this same facility with about the same membership, but the same membership can't maintain it. As an organization you have to decide what you want to be or you will just keep circling the maelstrom and get lower and lower until you disappear into the abyss. The task of discovering who you want to be will be in the hands of your search committee.

When I was in the Air Force in one of my jobs, I was production supervisor of an aircraft electronics squadron. One of the sections that worked for me was an analysis section. Here the staff monitored the records of all the aircraft electronic components that we repaired and recorded events like average time between failures for different components.

Well, as you can guess, this department helped me isolate which repair procedures might not be working the best. In this section there was a Technical Sergeant who was very smart. He could pick up on the problems before anyone suspected there was a problem. However his lifestyle contained too many parties. While I never saw him drinking at work, I had to push him really hard for him to work at his best or up to his potential. He would let things go until the last moment. He was always operating at 'just good enough". It was aggravating since he was so capable.

Finally I confronted him on his drinking and his work habits. He told me that he would still be in the squadron when I was long gone. He was right. He saw me as his problem and I moved on, so he never had to really face his own demon or his potential. I see him caught in the waters of the maelstrom and getting lower and lower but not willing to leave the boat. My sergeant illustrates another phenomena of crisis. Some people never get out of their desert or maelstrom.

They never change so they never cross the desert to get to their promised land or they keep circling their maelstrom for the remainder of their lives. We have all met people who have had a life crisis like a divorce or death that they can never let go and it dominates the rest of their lives, like spending forty years in the desert. The

brother who saw the barrel as salvation and was prepared to leave the safety of the boat survived, to leave the security of what he had known, but the brother who clung onto the stability of the familiar died.

I found flying aircraft that too many of my fellow flyers died because they stayed with an aircraft because it was the security they knew.

One previous job as a hospital chaplain at the U of Chicago had me helping lots of people who were in their maelstrom. I learned that there was usually not a lot I brought to a patient. What we as Chaplains tried to do was put people in touch with their own strengths, their manna in the desert, their axis mundi, the center of their world.

We cannot always see our strengths when we are obsessed with our problems or failures. For some people this strength was their faith, or their family or their religious community and for others it was just their stubbornness that they did not want this crisis to beat them. No matter what it was, this was what they had to get in touch, to make the transition to the post-liminal state. As a congregation or an individual you have to get in touch with your strengths.

Another fact about being in crisis is that you have to let go is the illusion of control and be open to the possibilities of the process. In some of the congregations that I worked this too was evident. They had the illusion that just because the building opened every Sunday they were in control and the prognoses for the patient was encouraging.

My own crises was similar, for months before I resigned, I was in crisis. In fact when I look back I was probably clinical depressed about my overwhelming issues. I rationalized my actions.

I kept going over what I could have done differently. I thought of possible ways I could have identified and coped with the problems I was facing. I had let down many people who depended on me. I had let down some in the congregation who depended on me to solve the congregation's problems.

I should have been able to see the effect these problems were having on me, but I didn't. I should have known, or seen, or done something to have precluded my fate. Finally I accepted that I had done my best and whatever happened, I had worth, I was still valuable, and it really wasn't about me. It was about my reaction. I had to

give myself the grace to not be perfect, to be human and to be able to make mistakes. My feet were in the sand and the sand formed around them. It was only after I gave myself this chance that I was able to let go and go out there and look for another job.

My pre-liminal state was one of expecting perfection of myself, to be able to solve any problem thrown at me, but when the gods proved me wrong and put me into chaos I needed to admit my limitations to pass beyond this state of chaos that rescued me from the maelstrom. Admitting my limitations was my barrel.

Some congregations in conflict see the minister as their problem and get a replacement rather than to look internally.

These too are in their boat not willing to change and in some incidents the same boat for generations of parishioners. I am sure my congregation two congregations ago saw me as the interim minister as someone who has stirred things up and then leaves. This is true, but if they don't address these stirrings they would still be in chaos when I am long gone.

All congregations are the same, they have all been in their maelstrom, in your desert and in your transition from interim minister to settled minister and to interim minister again. What they had thought was an end of the transition that is interim ministry is transition again.

Together they look to their own axis mundi, their strong sense of community, what makes them a congregation and their great love for each other. When you find yourself individually or corporately in a maelstrom, you are now on the trapeze with Sam Keen, you have done everything you ought to do, and you have to let go of the bar. It is now time to trust that the catcher will be waiting to catch you. This is having faith in yourself, trust in your leaders and each other and in the system we call the web of all existence.

In an ever evolving and never ending world. Amen.