

Changing Times

I've got some common sayings here. Let's see if you can help me finish them. "The only constant in life is ____." "If you don't like the weather, wait around and it will ____." "The definition of insanity is to do things exactly the same way and expect the results to ____." Very good! Now, I'm going to do something I very rarely do. I'm going to sing a song which some of you at least will know and when I get to the bits where you know the words, I invite you, indeed I implore you, to join me. Ready?

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone.
If your time to you
Is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'.

Come writers and critics
Who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide
The chance won't come again
And don't speak too soon
For the wheel's still in spin
And there's no tellin' who
That it's namin'.
For the loser now
Will be later to win
For the times they are a-changin'.

Come senators, congressmen
Please heed the call
Don't stand in the doorway
Don't block up the hall
For he that gets hurt
Will be he who has stalled
There's a battle outside
And it is ragin'.
It'll soon shake your windows
And rattle your walls
For the times they are a-changin'.

Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don't criticize

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What you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters
Are beyond your command
Your old road is
Rapidly agin'.
Please get out of the new one
If you can't lend your hand
For the times they are a-changin'.

The line it is drawn
The curse it is cast
The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is
Rapidly fadin'.
And the first one now
Will later be last
For the times they are a-changin'.

Can you guess what my sermon is about today? That's right, change. We betray a range of emotions about change. Some look forward to it. Some fear it. Bob Dylan was certainly a representative of change in the turbulent 60s and the song we just sang was his way of throwing down the gauntlet to those who resisted the changes he promoted – a voice for young people, equality of civil rights for Black Americans, an end to war as America's primary foreign policy tool. Our sisters and brothers in the recovery community, recognizing their own need for personal change, recite at the end of each of their meetings this famous prayer, often attributed to the theologian and ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, And wisdom to know the difference." There is a take-off on that prayer on the front of your bulletin this morning and there have been a number of other comic takes on it, one of which I'll mention later.

It's interesting to me that some cultures seem to deal more easily with change than others. For example, as most of you know, one of my all-time favorite televisions shows is the BBC's "Doctor Who," a science fiction show in which one of the primary components is the ability of the title character, a man from a distant planet, to "regenerate" from time to time, taking on a new body, face, and temperament while remaining essentially the same well-meaning character. Brits adopt this changing protagonist with aplomb, enjoying the occasional self-referential line about how different the Doctor is this time, much as they do with the other great face-changing hero, James Bond. Anybody remember the first line that the second Bond, James Lazenby, spoke in his one and only outing? "This never happened to the other guy."

Americans on the other hand, don't seem to deal with even fictional change very well. I've noticed on the various fan sites about Doctor Who that the loudest screams of anguish about new Doctors always seem to come from the Yanks, especially when, upon the latest regeneration, the

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producer abandoned the recent history of the Doctor as a young sex-symbol and went back to the original concept of the Doctor as an older, wiser, more mysterious type. And we don't seem to have as much of a sense of humor about change as the Brits. I remember when my mom watched soap operas back in the 70s and one of the characters on those shows was taken on by a new actor, there was no fanfare and no self-referential joking. The new portrayal was introduced by a tight-lipped announcement, "The role of Don Hughes is now being played by Peter Brandon," as if there were something shameful about the change and they didn't really want the viewers to notice but thought they probably might. We see this resistance to change in the political scene, as Dylan sang, and that certainly hasn't changed since the 60s. I wonder if the difference in this way between England and the U.S. might not have to do with the relative youth of the American system, with a Euro-centered civilization barely five hundred years old in North America and a political system extant for not even half that time, while kings of a relatively united England can be traced back to at least A.D. 827 over a number of dynasty changes and even an interregnum or two.

But the important thing for us today is not how we face change as Americans but how we deal with change as Christians, as followers of Jesus. I would suggest that for us, change is not to be greeted as the horror with which Dylan seemed to be taunting the Establishment but rather as an opportunity for the love of God to flow more freely in our world. I'd hold up as an example of that attitude the beautiful song by Sam Cooke, "I Believe a Change is Gonna Come." I'm not going to sing it – I'm pretty confident in my ability to sound at least as good as Bob Dylan but I dare not put myself in comparison with Sam Cooke – but here are some sample lyrics:

"There have been times that I thought I couldn't last for long
But now I think I'm able to carry on
It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change is gonna come..."

In case you are wondering where all these thoughts on change are coming from, the answer is in our readings from the Gospel According to John and the Acts of the Apostles this morning. The story from John may be familiar to you as it was to me but until this week, I'd never thought of it in exactly this way before. Consider the scenario: there is a man who has been ill for 38 years, enfeebled to the point that he has difficulty moving around. Like generations before him, he is attempting to take advantage of a miraculous pool. When, from time to time, the waters are mysteriously "stirred up," some say by an angel, the pool takes on healing qualities but only for the first sufferer who can step into the water. The poor fellow in our story has, because of his infirmity and the fact that he has no one to aid him, never been first in and so continues to languish.

We need to remember that there is no indication that this suffering man has been anything less than faithful. He has been sick and no one has been able to cure him. Other apparent incurables have been healed at the pool and continue to be. He is doing the best he knows how to do, trusting in a miracle from God, not giving up. He has put his faith in God's providential care as it has been revealed in his situation. But Jesus comes along with something new. "Do you want to be made well? Stand up, take your mat and walk." "At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk." Jesus was a voice of change. He presented a new option for healing and the man took it and was healed. The change came and it was good.

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We find a similar situation in Acts 15. Some of us, after a lifetime of reading the letters of Paul and hearing them explained to us in Sunday School and in sermons may be quick to say, “Well, those brothers from Judea were wrong and Paul was right.” But it’s really not that simple. We need to remember that up to this point, the Way of Jesus was seen as a reform movement in Judaism. Gentiles weren’t really considered. But suddenly Paul and Barnabas and Philip and even Simon Peter are describing how the Holy Spirit has moved in the lives of those who are not Jews so that they are worshipping the God of Abraham and claiming the lordship of Jesus. This is change, radical change, and it takes a while for those who have been followers of Jesus since the beginning to know how to process it. It’s really not an unfair question – do these Gentiles, unlearned in Torah, need to learn and follow its dictates as Jewish converts or do they, thanks to Jesus, have a special relationship with the Creator that does not include the Law given to Moses? The apostles, elders, and members of the church in Jerusalem came up with what they thought was a fair compromise but the question took a long time to settle and is actually still open today. What I want to emphasize, though, is that change can be hard to manage, even with the most faithful, loving, God-fearing and Jesus-believing people trying to cope with it.

These stories are important to us because change does continue to be a constant in our lives, even in the realm of spiritual matters. Listen again to what the Jerusalem Council, as it came to be known, set as the minimum standards for behavior for the new Gentile converts to the Way: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.” Strictly speaking, of course, it’s unlikely that any of us have eaten food that was previously offered to an idol or used in a pagan ceremony. But as someone who grew up with a middle-class standard of life thanks to a father who worked for a company that built fighter planes, ballistic missiles, attack helicopters, and other implements of the modern god of war, I’m sometimes a little queasy about the source of my childhood meals. And unless we buy our meat only at a kosher or hallal certified butcher shop, we’ve failed to abstain from blood and from what is strangled. As to fornication, sexual ethics and mores continue to shift in our time, just as they have from time immemorial. What is accepted in one generation seems abominable to another and vice-versa. We need to continue to strive to honor our Creator and the beautiful gift of sexuality in our lives with love that is tied to justice. It is never loving to take advantage of a power differential in a relationship but what is natural for one is not necessarily what is natural for another. Not even the prayerfully considered and Holy Spirit-inspired decision of the Jerusalem Council is immune from change.

As most of you know, I spent a good portion of last Saturday at Harborview with Kit and then following up on the aftermath of his accident. I want to again thank Charlotte and Lee and Jayne for stepping in with very little notice to lead you all in worship last Sunday. When we were called to the hospital, I had in my mind but not yet on paper or pixels the beginning of a sermon which included these verses from the Revelation to John, chapter 21: “And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.” One of the points I would have drawn from these verses is applicable today – it is God who is making all things new, God who is ultimately in charge of all

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the change. We should be concerned with the changes going on around us because we all have our part to play in how change occurs but we need not fear change because, and this is the great message of both Revelation and all the Scriptures, God is in control. In ways we cannot fathom or explain, the chaotic looking swirl of life is under the sway of the Creator of all things. As Dr. King said and I have repeated many times, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”

These ruminations on the nature of change as related to our quest to follow Jesus are not, as I suspect you know, delivered in a vacuum. All this week, I have been alerted to changes both accomplished and in the offing that affect me and you in both sacred and secular spheres. Those of us who live in Lynnwood, for example, are witnessing a potential sea-change in our public safety arrangements. Not only is city government carefully studying the possibilities of a new structure for fire and medical emergency services but we are about to launch a search for a new Chief of Police as Steve Jensen is retiring after 21 years, hard on the heels of the retirement of Deputy Chief Karen Mansur and one of Lynnwood’s longest-serving, most effective cops, Sgt. TJ Brooks.

Perhaps more importantly to this body, we continue to witness an enormous turnover in the leadership of our denomination. Even as we wait for the search committee to identify a new General Secretary to replace the retired Roy Medley, both the boards of Home Missions and International Missions have named new executive ministers in the past year as has the Ministers Council. This week, ABC-USA also released the news that associate general secretary Rev. Dr. Leo Thorne is retiring. Meanwhile, you may have read in yesterday’s Evergreen newsletter that one of ABC-USA’s newly adopted mission priorities is “The Gospel in a Rapidly Changing Society.” The case study for this priority includes these observations: “ABC has been a denomination which has historically adapted to the changing society, accepting, incorporating and supporting different cultures and ethnicities... Our challenge today is not to replicate that history but to be inspired by the biblical mission and our history as Baptist people to do in new and effective ways what our forebears did so creatively in their own days.”

That same Evergreen newsletter reminded us of changes even closer to home. Our nearest ABC seminary, American Baptist Seminary of the West in Berkeley, California, tragically lost their president, Rev. Dr. Paul Martin, to a heart attack last month. Evergreen’s executive minister, Rev. Dr. Marcia Patton, is on the board of the seminary, which is now called to unexpected action in identifying an interim President. Until that person is found, another faithful Evergreen layperson known to many of us, Dr. Michelle “Mickey” Holmes, the seminary’s vice-president for institutional advancement, is at the helm. And, of course, we in Evergreen are preparing for the retirement of Dr. Patton, the only executive minister we have ever had. Change is upon us and we all pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

But wait... there’s more! If you haven’t been a member of this congregation long, you may not be aware of our special relationship with University Baptist Church. It was that congregation, in 1960, which declared their willingness to sponsor a mission church in the new Seattle suburb of Lynnwood and donated money and loaned members to the new church, shortly to be named Good Shepherd. After years of decline, they agreed to sell their building in 2010 and seemed stable in a residency in the building owned by University Christian Church. Following the all-

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too-brief pastorate of Rev. Manny Santiago, however, the congregation went into planning mode again and are now considering a “relationship” with Keystone United Church of Christ. Good Shepherd’s “mother church” may soon cease to exist as a separate entity. That’s quite a change.

And then there are the questions about what sorts of changes we face. Things have changed a good deal in the eleven years that I have been your pastor. The “Pink House” and the apple trees and the blackberries and the south parking lot have gone to be replaced by Shepherd’s Garden. Six recovery groups and a preschool now share our building as well as two other congregations and a counselling service, which represents a return to our profile many years ago. Some familiar faces are missing; new friends have arrived. We’ve even got an honest-to-goodness men’s room! What will come next? How can we learn from our 55-year history as a congregation, our current strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities and threats presented by our environment and forge a new plan under the leadership of the Holy Spirit to take us into the next decade?

My sisters and my brothers, it is true that change is inevitable. But as people of faith, as servants of the Living God, as those dedicated to following the Way of Jesus, we recognize that our God is in control, making all things new. We stand on the promises of God and we can look forward, eagerly, to days of new beginnings. Thanks be to God! Amen.