

DATE: August 3, 2003

SUNDAY: Ordinary 15

SERMON: Something Old, Something New.

TEXTS Isaiah 42:5-9; 43:15-21 Mark 2:18-22

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I can't begin to tell you what it means to Carol and me that we are finally here to join in the life of this church. We've been in transition for two months, now, and are very happy to be getting settled in at last. Fortunately, our last post in Paris was a good training ground for dealing with change and transition, since at least 85% of the congregation is made up of people who are in transition— corporate employees coming to France to work for a couple of years, diplomats posted to the Paris embassy, students in France for their junior year abroad, or refugees from Liberia or Sierra Leone or other places where wars have devastated and disrupted normal life.

But we're glad to be settling in and excited about learning all the things we'll have to learn to feel really at home here. Carol and I are very grateful, first to you as a congregation for giving us the privilege of sojourning with you here for the next stage of the journey of this church. But also, there have been so many of you, individually or in groups who have helped us cope with the magnitude of the changes this transatlantic move has thrust upon us. From help in making contacts with realtors and bankers and tax consultants to scouting out potential houses, to transporting us to and from the airport, offering us a bed for the night or showering us with housewarming gifts, or bringing us meals the first few days after we arrived, we really cannot adequately begin to say thank you. If this is indicative of the hospitality of Mainers—whether native Mainers or those “from away” who have become Mainers by choice, then we're convinced we've come to a good place. So thank you to all of you who have helped us in so many ways.

I also want to express my gratitude, as I know you already have done, to Jill Small who gave of herself so generously to you as your interim pastor. It's one thing to be an interim

for a few months; it's something else again to be the interim pastor for two years as Jill was, and I deeply appreciate what she has done to ensure that the ministry of this congregation has not only continued, but even grown during these past two years. And to Chuck and Susan and Ray and Jane and Homer and Sally and all the volunteer staff and committee chairs who have worked so hard to keep things moving forward both on the program and the administrative fronts during the interim time, I also want to express my sincere appreciation. The church is fortunate to have such a devoted group of people on its staff.

A pastoral transition is always a significant time in the life of a congregation, both for the members as well as for the staff and the pastor himself or herself. It's both a time of anticipation and trepidation, because whatever else it is, it is a time of change.

So for a few moments this morning, I'd like to offer a biblical perspective that may help to guide us, not only in this time of transition as a congregation and pastor, but also in many of the transitions in our personal lives.

Both of our scripture passages this morning remind us that nothing ever stands still. If there's one thing we can be absolutely certain about, it's that things will change. As readily observable as this fact is, however, most of us, I suspect, really don't like change all that much. We're people who get comfortable with routine. We like to know what's going to happen next. We like situations that are predictable, and we usually create a host of small or large rituals that keep things that way as much as possible. One of mine is that when I get up every morning, I head for the kitchen to start the coffee brewing. Then, while the coffee-maker is doing its thing, I go to my study to check my email and glance at the headlines to see what God and other people have been doing while I was asleep. That ritual has been part of my life for years. I like that predictability to my mornings. When circumstances intervene to prevent me from carrying out my morning ritual of toothbrush, coffee machine and headlines, I feel displaced

or disoriented, and sometimes even a bit cranky. (My wife would probably tell you that I'm a bit cranky at other times too, so don't bother asking her. I prefer to think that I'm just establishing my credentials as a lovable curmudgeon. I don't think she's buying it, however.) I just like being in my comfort zone, as all of us do.

And yet, because we're big boys and girls, we know that life doesn't often permit us to control our lives to as great an extent as we would wish. We can't always "live our bliss" as the contemporary jargon puts it. Change happens. Sometimes it happens randomly and devastatingly. Just a few months ago, the chairperson of our Human Resources committee at the American Church in Paris and her husband were back in the States driving from Houston to Orlando to visit their daughter, when she began experiencing blinding headaches. They went to a hospital to get her checked out where she immediately lapsed into a coma that lasted ten days. During that time, they discovered that she had a massive brain tumor that demanded immediate surgery. Fortunately, it turned out not to be malignant, so she's recovering very well and doesn't appear to have suffered any permanent brain damage, but it was a very scary time. That's the sort of change for which we are never prepared.

Even the changes that we have planned for, such as our mutual decision that I should be your new pastor, the change itself will demand significant adjustments on both our parts.

The point is, nothing ever stays the same for very long. Even something as trivial as my morning ritual has changed. I'm coping with a new coffee maker and a new kitchen where all my utensils are in different places than they used to be. The headlines haven't changed much, however; they still convey mostly bad news.

The question is not, "How can we prevent things from changing and moving us outside our comfort zone," but rather, "How can we deal with what the Book of Common

Prayer so eloquently terms 'the changes and chances of this fleeting life' so that we emerge from our confrontation with change spiritually and emotionally more mature and more creative persons?

Whenever we're faced with change, we're confronted by two equally powerful, but opposition temptations. One response is to try to cling to the past, to the tried-and-true, to find security in our traditions and conventional wisdom. The other is to ignore or jettison the past because we can see no immediate relevance of the past in the present situation of change.

These two temptations are played out large in almost all the main denominations these days. Confronted with rapid changes in social mores, there are movements within all the main Christian bodies that are calling for a return to some imagined purer Christianity in the past—usually located in the fourth and fifth centuries when the great creeds were developed. There are also competing movements within each of the churches calling us to jettison the theologies and traditions of the past because they are no longer relevant in the present.

Those who want to return to the past are fond of quoting the poet George Santayana's observation that "those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it." There's something that rings very true about that, although what and how we learn from the past is actually quite problematical. But if we don't take the past seriously, we won't know who or where we are in the present. Tradition, which is simply, the accumulated wisdom from the past, can sometimes be a drag on us, but without it, we would have no stability or resources when facing the storms of life.

Those who want to jettison or ignore the past, however, are more fond of Henry Ford's entrepreneurial approach to the past expressed in his famous dictum, "History is bunk." And to be honest, there's something that rings true about that as well. A lot of history *is* bunk. If it weren't, psychologists and counselors would be out of business, since they spend a lot of

time helping people deal with their past in order to let it go and find freedom in the present.

Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan has expressed this dual character of the past, as it relates to the church, this way: “Tradition,” he says, “is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” The question for us, of course, is, how do we embrace and claim the living faith of the dead without allowing it to become the dead faith of the living? How do we look to the past to anchor us and provide us with stability without allowing the past to be a great drag on us when we should have all our sails unfurled to catch the wind of God’s Spirit, as it blows from the future?

Both of our lessons this morning provide us with some clues that can help us embrace the old while opening ourselves to the new in the midst of the changes that confront us, both personally, and as the pilgrim people of God.

The passage that Chuck read for us this morning from the Book of Isaiah reflects a time of traumatic and tragic change in the lives and fortunes of the people of God. They have lived through the horrors of having their land overrun with foreign armies, their capital city sacked and looted, the temple of God, which was the center of their religious life destroyed and defiled, and many of their leading citizens, all potential leaders, carried off into exile in Babylon. Certainly enough cause for them to feel just a little stressed. And certainly enough to make them long for the “good old days,” when God’s favor was evident in their prosperity and stability. Perhaps they were also tempted to think that God had abandoned them and to say, “Well, what you did in the past was fine, Lord, but what have you done for us lately?”

Into this traumatic situation of change, God’s word comes through the prophet. God’s answer to their fears and trepidations is to remind them of who God is and who they are. Thus says God the Lord who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out

the earth and gives breath to the people upon it. . . I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you. I have given you as a covenant to the peoples, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind and to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon. . . Do not dwell on the former things or long for the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

God reminds them that he was at work long before they came on the scene. God was the one, in fact, who created the whole scene. God also reminds them that he was active in their past, had called them by name, chosen them from among all the peoples of the earth to be the sign to all other peoples of God’s saving and liberating and healing love.

But the prophet also reminds them that God is always still creating something new. God is a God of the new—of the future. Even in their present circumstances, even in the midst of traumatic change, God is at work to bring forth something new. He will make a road where there is no road in the wilderness of confusion and fear, he will cause rivers to flow in the deserts where life is dry and bleak. In the very changes and upheavals which they find so intimidating, God is with them, working, creating, caring, shaping them into a people who will more perfectly declare his praise.

Our gospel lesson not only reinforces the truth that God is actively at work in the changes that confront us; it also offers us a clue to the matter of discerning where God is at work and responding appropriately.

In our lesson for this morning, Jesus is being questioned by the crowds as to why he and his disciples do not fast when the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees do fast. The religious tradition of Israel, sanctified by long usage, prescribed fasting on certain days of the week. The discipline of fasting was devised to remind us of our mortality, our dependence upon God for our very lives and daily bread. As such, it can be a creative spiritual discipline when used rightly. But like any other habitual practice, it can become a

hollow, formal act without any real significance for those practicing it— the dead faith of the living. The implication in the question of the people to Jesus is that fasting was justified simply because everybody had always done it. Sort of like the attitude that is found in some congregations— what one wag has called “The Seven Last Words of the Church:” “We’ve never done it that way before.”

As a result, their question signified a failure to correctly perceive the significance of Jesus’ preaching and teaching. They saw only that he was not doing things the way they had always been done. They saw only his and his disciples’ refusal to fast; and were blind to the fact that people were being healed of their sicknesses and liberated from their inner demons. They were so oriented toward the past, toward what had always been done that they missed what God was doing in the present.

Jesus replied that one does not fast at a wedding feast. It wouldn’t be appropriate. Nor, to change the metaphor, would it be appropriate to put new, and still fermenting wine, into old, dried out and cracked wineskins. The fermentation of the new wine would burst the skins and the wine lost.

What this passage suggests to me is that it is critically important that when we’re in a situation of change, we pause to discern what our true situation is so that we can respond appropriately. When confronted by something new, something outside our established habits, we should not immediately assume that it is bad or threatening, even though we’re likely to feel it’s threatening if it pushes us out of our comfort zone at some points. Rather, we should seek to discern what the new reality is, and what an appropriate response in light of the new situation might be.

When we lose our openness to the future, which is what resistance to change really is, when we opt for staying in our comfort zone, when we refuse to take some risks because we’re afraid of the unknown, we settle for stale bread and moldy cheese when we could be eating prime rib and drinking good champagne at a wedding feast.

This is not to say that all change is good. It’s not. Some changes are undoubtedly negative or destructive. But neither is all change bad or threatening. Discerning the presence and activity of God in the new situation is critical if we’re to make an appropriate response. New wine demands new wineskins. And the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that it is always new wine. Into every old situation in life, whether it be our stale marriages or our compulsive habits and addictions or our strained relationships with our children or our parents or our enslaving attachments to possessions, the gospel confronts us with the possibility that all things, and most especially we ourselves, can become new. In Christ, everything is always new, and wonderful! New beginnings, new opportunities, new possibilities, even in those places where the dullness of our sight has blinded us to the true nature of the reality that confronts us. The gospel is about a God who makes roads in the wilderness, causes rivers to flow in the desert, and who offers us a banquet instead of crumbs.

In the weeks and months ahead, as we deal with the changes that confront us in our personal lives and in our life together as a church, my hope and prayer is that we will do it with our senses alert to the new things that God wants to do among us. If we are open to those new things, if we are willing to take the risk of leaving our comfort zones, if we are willing to respond creatively to the Spirit’s moving, we will know the joy of Christ and become a lighthouse of hope for those in this community who are desperately in need of it.