



THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE  
Jeremiah 31:31-24; 2 Corinthians 5:17-19

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In 1967 a nine-year-old boy died of old age. He was suffering from Progeria, a disease described as rapidly advancing age. At nine years old he had all the symptoms of a person ninety years old. He was bald. His skin was very wrinkled. He suffered from hardening of the arteries and other difficulties of people in advanced age. You may have seen reports within the past few years on television or in the newspapers about several other young people who were suffering from this same illness.

I first read about this illness in Alvin Toffler's book, *Future Shock*. He used this boy as an example to describe the rapidity of change in its impact upon the world today. Just as a small nine year old boy seems to have lived ninety years within his short nine years, so many of us feel that time has been compressed by the changes which have taken place so quickly. It is difficult to adjust to the rapidity of the changes happening all around us in our world today. It is astounding what has happened so quickly. Look at the areas of medicine, science, and technology over the past few years. The changes that have occurred have been astronomical.

### **The Rapidity of Change**

Two writers, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, have used the metaphor of a clock face to depict the changes which have happened within civilization. The sixty minutes on the clock represent the three thousand years since writing has been used. Each minute stands for fifty years. These two men then set some figures on that time clock so we could see how close we are to many of the great events in world history. Only nine minutes ago on this kind of time clock, the Printing Press was invented. Three minutes ago the locomotive, the telegraph, and the phonograph were invented. Two minutes ago the radio, motion picture, rotary press, the telephone, the automobile and the airplane were invented. The motion picture, which was invented just a few moments ago, added sound only a minute ago. Within the last ten seconds television and communication satellites were invented. Within the last five seconds computers came into existence; and within the last fraction of a second the laser, microchips, open-heart surgery, heart by-pass surgery, and transplants have been introduced. We are told that more has happened within the last split second

scientifically, medically, technologically, and educationally than has taken place in all the rest of known history. And we wonder why we are shocked by the rapidity of the change all around us! Many simply do not know how to adjust to it at all.

I am old enough that I can remember the “B.T.” days, “before television.” There are days when we would all like to be free of television. Television, though, has rapidly changed our society. Our homes are often geared around it. Politicians now run their campaigns around television exposure. Many are elected because they are good at public relations and promotion and may be weak in political savvy or insight. It is the image that sells them. Television has changed sports, made it available for instant consumption, and holds an ideal of ability that will forever elude most of us. Television determines products we buy, where we go for vacations, clothes we wear, cars we ride in, and so many other things about our whole lifestyle. This is true even to the point of what has happened in religious services on television. Entertainment is now the chief religious sales pitch and, if we are not entertained, many feel that they have not had a religious experience with God.

The automobile has also changed our society. Our landscapes have mountains of old cars piled high. Cities have been built around automobiles. Courting habits have been changed by automobiles. Businesses and their job markets are determined often by the accessibility of automobiles. Computers, e-mail, fax machines, cell phones and other forms of technology have forever changed our lifestyles. Yes, our society has undergone a great deal of rapid change, and some of us really do not know how to adjust to them.

Snoopy is seen lying on his doghouse in a peanuts cartoon. The night is black; the stars are shining brightly. As he is looking up into the heavens he says, “I am always impressed by the constancy of the stars. It gives me a feeling of security to look up and know that the star I see will always be there. And will ...” Suddenly he sees a shooting star fall across the sky. In the next frame, you see Snoopy lying across the top of his doghouse with his head down and with a droopy look of dismay. We are beginning to discover that even the stars fall and do not last forever.

Some have exclaimed: “Alas, alas the times now are not what the times used to be!” That inscription was written six thousand years ago in Babylonia. Even then times were changing. One of the popular songs of a few years back declared: “The times, they are a-changing.” It is difficult for us to imagine what people tomorrow will think about the changes that will take place in the tomorrows ahead of us.

### **We Often Prefer the Familiar and Fear Change**

What can we, you and I, as Christians do in response to all the changes that are going on around us? How do we react to them? Well, a lot of us, if we are honest,

really prefer permanency and fear change. We really do not like change. We want the old shoes and comfortable clothing. We slip into them quickly when we get home at the end of a busy day. Some of us prefer antiques because we know the quality of the merchandise and something about the era in which they existed. We like the security and the sense of permanency in those items. We know their style, history, and value and feel at home with them. We cling to that which is familiar and identifiable.

Halford Luccock said that he once took his six-year-old daughter for an afternoon ride on a merry-go-round in a nearby park. After five rides, she turned to him and said: "I'd like to live on a merry-go-round!" A lot of us prefer the merry-go-round type of life. We prefer to move around in those familiar circles in which we are secure. We want schedules and routineness. We reach out for some kind of security blankets of orthodoxy, customs, or traditions that make us feel comfortable. We desire those things that make us feel secure. We prefer the old paths and traditions that we understand. And we often cling tightly to them. We hug the shore of familiarity.

But...our world today is feeling an earthquake; a tremor that is tumbling the familiar structures all around us. Everything permanent is being shaken loose. The ground seems to be reeling beneath our feet and the important things are passing out of our life. As the walls begin to crack and fall, some of us do not know which way to turn. We look for a toe-hold. We look for something to cling to. We search for some secure, snug harbor where we can put our anchor down and remain secure. We are often terrified and frightened by the changes and do not know where to go or what to do. As the poet, W. B. Yeats, says "All changed, changed utterly."

"Hold the old way" is the watch-word of this perspective. Too many of us are like the old farmer who was interviewed as he approached his ninetieth birthday. "I suppose there have been a lot of changes in your lifetime," noted the reporter. "There shore have been," the farmer replied, "and I've been agin every blasted one of 'em!" A lot of us are that way. We simply cannot stand the changes that are going on around us. We scorn the new and sanctify the old; criticize the different and cling to the familiar; reject the changes and reclaim the customary; throw over the unfamiliar and hold on to the traditional.

### **Change Is At the Heart of the Universe**

Change is indeed all around us and we do not know where to turn or where to go. But we need to realize that change is at the very heart of the universe itself that was designed by God who created it. When God created man and woman and placed them within the world God created them for growth. On examination, we discover that man/woman and the whole universe are still in process of changing, growing,

and becoming. Nothing is finalized or complete. When God looked upon creation, God said “Behold it is good.” Creation was not perfect, not finished, not over. God said, “It is good.”

This pulpit seems solid. The pews you are sitting on seem solid. But we are told by scientists that they are really particles in motion. If we could put them under the proper microscope, we could see that in actuality they are in motion. Our bodies are all still in process of growing. As one cell is dying, a new one is coming into existence. The atom itself is energy in motion. For awhile scientists thought the atom was a fixed unit, but when it was split, a world was discovered inside of it, also. Heat and light are waves or particles in motion. Matter does not perish but changes. Everything is in process and is constantly changing, sometimes rapidly and sometimes slowly. All creation is continuously growing. And where there is no change, there is no growth. Growth does not come if there is no change. But change, life will and must.

### **Sometimes Change Is Painful**

If you don't think you have changed, look at a picture taken ten years ago. We all change. Exercise produces for us some sense of pain, if we have not done much for a while, or if we engage in an exercise that we are not used to. You and I know that when we flex muscles that have not been used to being exercised, we feel the strain upon our body. Our first steps were painful. We stumbled and fell several times before we could walk. Learning comes through the discipline of time, energy, and mental abilities. Growth itself is sometimes painful. Pain is a part of life. Ernest Campbell, the former minister of Riverside Church in New York City, asked a friend once “How do you know whether you should be for change or not?” He answered directly: “If it hurts, it's good.” Real change always produces some pain in our lives because it indicates our need for some kind of growth. We always experience pain when the radically new comes into our lives. It is almost always painful when something that is different from the routine crosses our path.

Many people have stood in the way of progress and have simply marked time and watched it march past them, because they have spent too much of their time clinging to the shore of the past and being unwilling to move toward the future. For some of us our motto is “Hang on to the old.” Some ignore anything that is unfamiliar and hang on only to that which is certain and sure. Flexibility is a part of growth. Tall skyscrapers and high bridges are constructed to give a little in the wind. It is tragic indeed when life itself has built into it the whole process of change and growth and we choose instead the way of death-inflexibility.

When the great leader of Israel Moses died, God chose a new leader, Joshua.

God confronted Joshua down by the River Jordan and said to him: “Moses, my servant is dead. Arise go over Jordan.” Moses did a great work as a leader of Israel, but his time was now past. Joshua the new leader was challenged to arise and lead the nation even further. Dr. Dan Day served faithfully as pastor of this congregation for eleven years. His dedicated ministry is affirmed and this church will continue to build on the fine leadership he offered. But the church now looks to the coming of a new leader to guide them into the future.

### **Change Is At the Center of the Christian Faith**

The Christian insight is to see that we are committed not just to a dead past and what used to be but to the God who is marching on before us toward tomorrow. Let us seek to follow the God who is leading us into that which is yet to be. God’s Spirit is guiding us forward to realize the potential as his people and his Church that God has for us to be. Change is the nature of the Christian faith. Christianity has at its center an understanding of the newness of life. Repentance is at the very heart of our faith. We are challenged to turn from the old, and turn to the Christ who gives us a new direction in life.

### **A New Covenant**

When we read the story from the book of Jeremiah, the great prophet tells the people about the New Covenant that God is making with Israel. They had broken the old covenant, and they had rejected it because they had not remained faithful to God. God declared that He was giving them a new covenant which shall be written on their hearts. Jurgen Moltmann, a contemporary theologian, says that it might be better understood today to say that it was written on “our conscience.” God writes upon our own conscience a sense of the newness that God has come to give us. As Christians we feel that it is in Jesus Christ that we find the new covenant fulfilled. It is a covenant placed in your heart and my heart by a vital relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **The New Creation**

The change is radical. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, “The old has passed away, the new has come.” There is a new creation. Old things are passed away, behold they are becoming new.” In divine newness, God brings transformation not destruction, renewal not obliteration. God’s spirit transforms us into a higher form. This is seen most vividly in Paul’s metaphor of planting of grain as a picture of the change of the Christian at the time of death from a material body to a spiritual body. “Behold I show you a mystery.” (I Corinthians 15:35-50) Here is the ultimate

transformation. We pass from the earthly to the heavenly, from the material to the spiritual.

### **Change Within and Without**

The Christian faith has ‘new’ as a key word in its religion. We speak about a “new birth,” a “new song,” a “new commandment,” a “new creation,” and “renewal of spirit”. Our faith is founded on newness and change within and without. When we seek the traditional we may be far from the spirit of the Christ who came to usher in the new covenant. To desire absolute security is not to understand the God who is constantly seeking to move us forward to be like the divine Creator. The world cannot be saved without being changed, and neither can we. Change begins with us as individuals.

You can’t contain the new wine that Jesus Christ is seeking to give us in old wineskins. He says his presence will burst them. Jesus Christ is constantly disrupting old customs, constantly setting aside old traditions, deposing ancient creeds and beliefs, that we might see the newness, freshness, and vitality of His spirit and power in our world today.

### **God, the Agent of Change**

I guess it was over fifty years ago that Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote that the commonest sin of Christians is respectability. Stagnation has no place in the Christian life. We think that the gospel has always got to be so orthodox or that it must be so traditional. We forget that God is continuously revising our traditions, and bringing new insights, new directions, and new ways of understanding who and what God is as the God of the universe. God is the agent of change. The “new creation” parallels the original creation in its radical change in our lives. God transforms our outlook, values, philosophies, theologies, systems and nature.

In the Highgate Cemetery in London, England, there is a grave with the bust of Karl Marx on it with this inscription: “The philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it.” We cannot leave all changing to communism. Jesus Christ came into the world not simply to interpret an old law, not simply to tell us about an ancient tradition, not simply to please everybody’s orthodoxies, or so religious people could be satisfied or made happy. He came to bring something radically new in the world. He came to transform life and to bring us into communion and fellowship with the God whose love is radical in its demand upon us and in the kind of change it seeks to make in your heart and in mine. He didn’t come to annihilate the old but to infuse it with a newness of life that no one had really experienced before. Change is always dangerous, but not to change leads to stagnation of spirit and perspective.

## **The Church is Facing Many Changes**

The institutional church is facing many changes today. Some people will not like the changes that will occur. The church must project its ministry for the future. The church of tomorrow may not be the same church it is today. Some want the church to be a small community church that it once was years ago. Some want the church to go back and be like the church was in the fifties. But the church will never be like it was in the fifties again, or the sixties, seventies, eighties or nineties. The church has to have a vision that will enable it to reach out into the cities, across the countryside, and all across the land, to draw people into fellowship, service and ministry for Christ. First Baptist now faces a change in pastoral leadership. It needs to open and flexible as it faces the future.

We can't talk about clinging to the old ways of what we used to be like. Instead we need to open ourselves to the freshness and the vitality of what God is seeking to call us to be as God's people today. Our responsibility is to be God's Church today, not last week, not last month, not two years ago and not thirty years ago, but what we can be as God's people today is God's challenge to us. We have to open our spirits to God's spirit to experience the warmth and guidance of the divine presence as God goes before us. We can't go back, only forward. God doesn't always come into our lives to make us comfortable or secure. Sometimes God comes into our lives to make us very uncomfortable. God may challenge our security to motivate us to be pioneering, courageous, and adventuresome in service and ministry.

We have to be careful that we do not fall into the sin of thinking that we can confine God to our buildings. Ancient Israel knew that God could not be contained within their tents made of skins, and neither shall we contain God within our buildings. Our church buildings should be the place where we gather to worship God and seek to find ways to minister effectively for God in the city and community. But I believe that God is always calling us to be a pilgrim people. God calls us to go out into the world as agents of reconciliation. Having been reconciled by God, we now go into the world to touch others with the sense of the power, presence and love that has touched your life and my life. And go ... we must. We shall be God's pilgrim people who are seeking to go into the world with God's love. We lift our anchor and hoist our sails to follow God into the seas of life.

## **God Is Constant**

In the midst of a world that is constantly changing, you and I rest our sense of assurance on the God who goes before us and who is the God who is constant. We

sometimes sing: "O Thou who changest not, abide with me!" We rest our assurance in a changing world on the one who abides forever. God is the perfect being. God is perfection. Our challenge is to be more like God. God calls us to reach beyond where we already are in our moral and spiritual growth. We are challenged by Jesus to be perfect as our Heavenly Father is. Although it is a goal that is always evasive and beyond our grasp, it is a goal that pulls us beyond who and what we have already realized to what we can become through the presence and power of Christ in our life.

Christ is the One who is from everlasting to everlasting. He is the One who is the same yesterday, today and forever. You and I can probably never adjust very well to change unless we are vitally related to the One who is unchanging -the eternal God of the universe. You and I cling to the assurance that we can depend upon God. Though we may not always understand God's spirit, and though we may not understand totally God's way of working in the world, we have a strong sense of assurance and competence in the unchanging One. We put our trust in God and know that God's peace strengthens us, that God's comfort comforts us, and that sometimes God's challenging spirit challenges us to live differently in the world.

Lloyd Douglas, author of *The Robe*, said once he went to visit a friend of his who was an old violin teacher. He said he enjoyed talking with this friend because he had a kind of homely wisdom which refreshed him. One morning Douglas entered his studio and asked: "What's the good news today?" His old friend reached over and picked up a padded mallet and hit his tuning fork which was suspended from a silken cord, and said: "There's the good news for today. That, my friend, is the note 'A'. It was 'A' all day yesterday. It will be 'A' all day tomorrow and next week and for a thousand years. The soprano upstairs may warble off-key, the tenor next door may flat his high ones, and the piano across the hall may get out of tune. And there may be noise all around us. But that, my friend, is an 'A'. That is the good news."

The good news for you and me is that there is constancy in the presence and power of the God of our universe. We can have confidence because we have this presence and power in our lives. Although we know that we do not have the total knowledge of who and what God's will and purpose is we have sufficient knowledge to enable us to live with assurance. To be related to the One who is constant is good news for us.

A woman called her pastor and asked him to come see her father who was dying. He indicated he would come by as soon as possible. The daughter indicated to him that at sometime she would have to run to the store and she said, "I'll leave the door open. If there is no answer to your knock, just go on in. You'll find my dad's room is in the back." Later the pastor stopped by to visit the man. He knocked on the door but there was no answer, so he went on through the house to the father's room. When he got to the room, he found a chair was pulled up close beside the bed. "Ah,

you must have been expecting me,” the minister said. “No,” said the man, “the chair hasn’t been put there for you. I’ve been having trouble praying, but a friend said if I would put a chair there for the Lord and pretend he was sitting there, I could talk to him more naturally. So I placed a chair there and tried it, and it really works.” “That’s fine,” said the minister. “Anything that is helpful is good.”

A few days later, the woman let the pastor know that her father had died. He expressed his sympathy and asked if her father had died easily. “I think so,” she said. “He had called me in to show me something in the funny papers and we both had a good laugh. Then, I went out to the store to get some milk and when I came back I found him dead.”

“I’m glad your father’s death was easy,” said the minister. “There was just one strange thing,” said the woman. “Oh?” said the minister. “Yes,” she said, “apparently he had pulled a chair over to the bed and was struggling to get into it or to use it to stand up, because when I found him, he had put his head and shoulders over the chair and died with his head in it.”

We can step into today, tomorrow, the next century or the life that stretches beyond death with the assurance that God is there. We know we can trust God to be with us in the quest for a new pastor. We can place our life in the hands of Christ with the assurance that nothing separates us from the love of God. We know that Christ will be present to sustain us and guide us. This is the bedrock of our faith and even if change is all around us we have that assurance.

So, go forth as God’s people in the world, unafraid of change, because we have within our lives the One who changes not. We need not fear the changes that will come in our church, community, or in our own lives because we have the assurance that nothing separates us from God’s presence when we are in Christ Jesus, our Lord. So, let change come, and let us be a part of the change agent in the world as God works through us to carry on the ministry of reconciliation. Live always with the assurance that God is present with you and will make each of us secure.

O Loving God, like small children, we are so frightened of change. Teach us, Eternal Lord, in the midst of all of change that You are with us. May we learn to grow within change and through it. May your spirit open new frontiers before us. As your pioneer people, may we be willing to march forward and not retreat, because we follow the banner of Christ who goes before us. Amen.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, we lift before you the members of this congregation as we begin a new pilgrimage together. We thank you for the rich heritage and dedicated

ministry which has gone on in the past years and continues to this time. We know that you are present with us in this present moment. Give us the assurance of your abiding presence and direction as we labor as pastor and people together. May we not be so bound by the past that we cannot see your leadership for the future.

We commit now this present time in worship to you. We come to fortify ourselves and to be strengthened to serve you more effectively. We give to you all of the anxieties we have about the future and our uncertainties about the roads of life ahead of us individually and as a church. Our faith has been built on the confidence and assurance of your presence with us in the past. We turn now and look toward the future. As a child trusts its parents, as the birds trust the air, the animals trust their instincts, so we lean in trust upon you and your grace.

Give us the assurance that your strong arm will bear us up no matter what our difficulty is. We trust you whether our burden is grief, a family member who is ill, a family member who has lost a job, or we are crushed by a load of depression. May we have a strong sense of your presence to lift us up.

As we step into the future before us, we open our spirits to your Spirit so we might be led by your hand; feel the strength of your grace and love, and the breath of your presence within us. Lord, we wait now in confidence for your guidance in all that we think and do. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our living Lord. Amen. ■