

Living with Change

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14
John 6:51-58

Crossroads Christian Church
August 16, 2015 Pentecost 12B

You have probably heard me say this joke before, but it is so appropriate for this sermon that you're going to hear it again. How many church members does it take to change a light bulb? The answer: CHANGE? MY GRANDFATHER GAVE THAT LIGHTBULB TO THIS CHURCH!

Well, that's one way of dealing with change—just trying to forbid it from happening. And we all know how that works. It works, maybe, for a while, but then change accumulates and accumulates like snowflakes turning into snow drifts, and we're overwhelmed. Like they say, the only constant is change. We have to cope with it; we have to deal with it. Sometimes change is for the good, and improves our lives. Other times, change brings trouble, hard times, and suffering. And where is God in all this? Some say that God is the one still point in a changing world, the one constant rock in a sea of change. Others say that God is the agent of change, coaxing us toward a better future. Still others say that no matter what life brings, God is always there with us, helping us through, supporting us when we would fall, comforting us when we would weep, rejoicing with us when we triumph.

What does the Bible say? First of all, it fascinates me how when we review the history of God's people in the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament, their two most formative events, the events that most shaped who they were, were times of unexpected change, times of discomfort, times of displacement, times of terribly difficult transition.

The first formative event was the Exodus. Moses led a group of slaves into the wilderness, and there, in terrible pain and hardship, they were forged into a people. They were afraid; many wanted to leave that wilderness and go back to Egypt; many of them proved unfaithful, but through Moses, God gave them a law to live by, and through Joshua gave them a land. Whenever Jewish believers celebrate the Passover to this day, they don't say, "when our ancestors were in Egypt," they say, "when we were in Egypt." For that's when they became a people. Our Gospel lesson shows us this, as Jesus, who had just fed a multitude, was offering the people his own life, to be their living bread. The people remembered the manna that God had provided for them in the wilderness centuries before, but some weren't willing to accept the new living bread that God was offering in Jesus Christ. "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

The second formative event was the Exile in Babylonia. After years of believing that they had it made, that God would always protect them, the Jews saw their holy city's walls torn down, and they saw the Temple, God's home, demolished, then they were hauled off into exile by the conquering army. Psalm 137:1-3 says, "By the rivers of Babylon-- there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" What did they do? Did they give up? No, the prophets and scholars helped them redefine themselves. They made a quantum leap of faith and began to have a vision of what it meant to be a light to the nations. It was a painful time, but it was a time to grow up, a time to find maturity. Many of the books of the Old Testament came out of this time period, as the Jewish believers moved from being a people of the altar to being a people of the book.

Let's turn briefly to today's OT reading. It talks about a time that was less traumatic than the exile, but still it was a time of transition. King David, the popular, charismatic king, died after a long life, and his young son Solomon took the throne. How could someone barely more than a child hope to follow a legendary figure like David? In a dream, God asked Solomon to make a request to help him get started as a ruler. Solomon didn't ask for money or power, he asked for wisdom. He knew that many tough decisions would come his way, and he needed to be able to respond wisely and well. God was pleased at his request, and it was granted, and he also received wealth and power.

Lisa Sharon Harper commented on Solomon's choice. "Solomon asks for wisdom. Wisdom is described as the ability to discern between good and evil. Help me know the difference between good and evil. ... God tells us what goodness is. Goodness (*tov*) according to the Hebrews was not merely located in the object itself. It is located between things. In Genesis 1, Goodness refers to the integrity, the wellness, the bond of relationship between all created things! And the word "very" (*me'od*) tells us how true, how deeply, how forcefully, how bonded those relationships were. The web of relationships between God and all God's creation was forcefully, overwhelmingly, abundantly goooooood! That is God's definition of goodness!

So, Solomon is essentially asking God, "Give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people [a mind] able to discern that which protects, serves, and cultivates the relationships of your people to you, to themselves, to each other, to the earth, to the systems of governance, and to our surrounding nations! And show me what is evil—what destroys, threatens, corrupts any of these

relationships.” This is wisdom.”¹ (unquote) In other words, Solomon is asking for a wisdom rooted in God’s love and shalom. Interestingly enough, Harper’s quote was in the midst of an article on Ferguson, and how ministers of different faiths and races worked together there over the past year to help restore community.

So we should pray for wisdom during our own time of transition as a church, a kind of wisdom that is more than intelligence, more than common sense, because it is rooted in faith and love.

We are living with change, and that’s okay. We don’t need to be afraid of the future, because God is there, bidding us forward. As Moses discovered the hard way, it’s easier to worry, to find fault, to want to turn back to a “good old days” that’s only real in our imaginations. I’ve heard it called “toxic nostalgia”—being so in love with an imagined past that it ruins the way we relate to the present. But complaining leads to faithlessness, to bad decision making. It’s much harder, but much more fruitful, to build trust in one another, to work toward an as-yet undefined future, to build prayer upon prayer for God’s guidance, and to earnestly seek discernment for God’s will. Be faithful and that will lead you to be fruitful.

We at Crossroads Christian Church are living with change, and we have tried to live faithfully through change for many years. We are on a journey together, toward a future that only God knows. What will this church be like next year? Five years from now? Ten? Only God knows. As we continue to pray, as we continue to work side by side, as we continue to worship together, as we continue to enjoy one another’s friendship and fellowship, as we continue to share one another’s burdens and joys, we will seek God’s guidance and we will find it. Remember what I said earlier, that the two most uncomfortable periods in Israel’s history—slavery and exodus, and the exile, were also its most creative? Maybe we’re at just such a time on a much smaller scale here at Crossroads. We’re a dwindling, aging congregation in a setting where it’s hard to find new members, but maybe that’s God’s call to be creative, to be inventive.

One of the striking things to me is the faith that we express in God. We’re in a tough situation, sure, and we don’t know what the future might bring. But as we put our faith in God’s steadfast love at the forefront, we can find a sure and solid basis for hope in the midst of change.

Jesus Christ will continue to be the bread for the journey, our manna in the wilderness, and in Holy Communion as well as daily prayer, Christ will give us sustenance and strength. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

¹ Lisa Sharon Harper, *Ferguson, One Year Later: Give us Wisdom*. Odysseynetworks.org.