

"A Change Is Gonna Come"

A sermon Inspired by Genesis 7:17-23; 8:6-7, Exodus 34: 27-32, Matthew 4:1-11, and Acts 1:1-5

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Scripture tells us that:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven
(Ecclesiastes 3:1 NRSV).

For some, that could be great news. There are those who thrive on change and who are fearless in the face of those big transformational moments that life undoubtedly will bring to us all whether we seek such moments or not.

For others, change can be unpleasant, unsettling. Even good changes can bring anxiety.

Can anyone here this morning think of any changes in the life of this congregation that might be unsettling or anxiety provoking?

This church has lost a pastor - Gail McDougle, a good and faithful servant of God - whose retirement came too quickly to say good-bye in the ways we wanted. There will be moments where that loss will be felt deeply as Gail establishes her new life in Florida, both for her and for this congregation. A change is gonna come, as the son says, whether we want it or not.

That anxiety, that fear of change isn't just being felt today by Gail's absence. At the same time, there are people in this church struggling with the loss of loved ones who have passed on, fighting off disease, or, in happier terms, welcoming new life into the world through the birth of a child or anticipating an upcoming graduation this Spring.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

Life follows patterns and sometimes, with effort, we can steer our own course with little effort and other times the currents take us to places we least expect to go.

For those of us in the church, we seek out God during moments such as these - particularly such as these - and ask for answers, guidance and perhaps even for God to resolve our problems for us. And we are sometimes disappointed when God doesn't fly in like Superman - faster than a speeding bullet, stronger than a locomotive - and just fix things. But alas, Superman is a character created for the movies and God is, well, God and not Superman (though we sometimes confuse the two).

No, there is no Superman or Wonder Woman about to rescue us from life. Yet, we still proclaim, as we did this morning in our call to worship that:

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble. (Psalm 46:1 (NRSV))

As my colleague Rev. Wagener preached in her sermon last Sunday, it isn't just this church or our membership that is going through a profound period of change. The whole world - literally - is in a period of change...some of it good (like the overthrow of dictators) and some of it bad (such as the realities of human-caused global climate change).

In the face of these change, we are not alone. But as we seek God in such a moment as this what is it we expect?

Are any of you fans of the television program *The West Wing*? There was an episode - season one - called Take This Sabbath Day in which the plot line has the president confronted with a difficult moral issue - whether or not to allow the death penalty to take place or, as his faith demands, stop it by commuting the sentence. The president consults with his parish priest and confides that he is angry with God for not answering his prayers. The priest tells this story:

There was a man who lived by the river who heard a radio report that a flood was coming and that everyone must evacuate. Not me, said the man. God loves me. God will save me. Then the flood waters come and a rescuer arrives on a row boat. Hop on board, says the rescuer. I'm fine replies the man. I'm a religious man, God will save me. Finally, a helicopter arrives and a rope is thrown down to the man by the river. I don't need it, he says. I'm fine. God will take care of me, God loves me. The man drowns. At the gates of St. Peter's the man demands an audience with God and says: Why did this happen? I'm a religious man. I pray to you. I'm faithful. Why did you let me drown? God replies, I sent you a radio report, a row boat and a helicopter. What are you doing here?

There is a song that goes along with this story (in my head at least) from John Legend, the R & B singer, called *If You're Out There*. The lyrics include these two verses:

If you're ready, we can shake the world.
Believe again, it starts within.
We don't have to wait for destiny.
We should be the change that we want to see.

If you hear this message, wherever you stand.
Calling every woman, calling every man.
We're the generation, can't afford to wait.
The future started yesterday, and we're already late.

If I haven't made a good enough, a direct enough point yet let me try to tie this all together:

In the midst of change - change in our own lives, in the life of the church, in the wider world - God is active through us...calling us all to ministry....to be agents of God's mission in the world...to be the radio report, the row boat, the helicopter. We are all God's partners in ministry. Peggy Way, one of my professors at Eden Theological Seminary, wrote in her 2005 book *Created by God* that "in Christian theology care goes with baptism and not ordination." In other words, we're all in this together, lay and ordained alike.

So in the midst of any anxiety over change we can feel relief that God has brought us all together in this place not just to be ministered to but to minister with all in this community and the larger world as well. It will be in this context of mutual ministry that we will together transition from the gifted leadership of Gail McDougale to a shared model of ministry as we start writing a new chapter of history, a chapter that must be written because the voice of the still-speaking God needs be heard in this community in a time of religious fundamentalism and adherence to rigid doctrine that keep too many from knowing the full magnitude of God's grace and love. We don't pretend in the United Church of Christ to know all the answers but we aren't afraid of asking questions and being comfortable with uncertainty, and our task at the very least is to find ways to keep that presence alive for future generations.

This moment offers up for us an example of the complexity of the human experience. Even a time of change, like Gail's retirement, with which it brings fear, there is also the element of hope and even excitement.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven
(Ecclesiastes 3:1 NRSV).

In Scripture stories - when God has really big news - it is generally announced with these words:

Do not be afraid!

Let me give you an example, perhaps the best known, from Luke 1:26-34:

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'* 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' 34 Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'

A modern translation of Mary's response might read: "You're kidding me! That's not possible!"

Whenever you hear an angel say in Scripture "Do not be afraid!" it has been said that's the time to run. That's the time the hard work is about to begin.

So...I say to you this morning: Do not be afraid! Change is all around us: in our personal lives, in the church, in the world. And in times of transition, we are not alone. Not only do we have each other but we can rely on our God who is always with us, sometimes in unexpected and challenging ways.

Do not be afraid!

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Amen.