

Psalm 46:1-7
Hebrews 13:1-8

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
August 8, 2021

Change and the Changeless

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm today is about trust in God. God is declared to be our refuge and strength, even though the mountains shake and the nations totter. The psalm was the text for Martin Luther's famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Listen to these words from Psalm 46:1-7...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In our Epistle Lesson today we hear some final exhortations to a congregation. There are reminders about hospitality, visiting those in prison, honoring marriage, and avoiding the love of money. Leaders can help, but our true and abiding guide is Jesus Christ. Listen to these words from Hebrews 13:1-8...

Sermon

My father was born in 1910. I came along in 1946. I can recall him telling me of the time in his teenage years, when the family moved from Magee, Mississippi, to Jackson, in a wagon, on a dirt road. In his later years the 45-mile trip could be made in an automobile on a four-lane highway in about an hour.

There is hardly anyone today, especially in the Upstate of South Carolina, who would deny that we are swept up in a tidal wave of change. Development is taking place at a far faster rate than ever before. Farmland is giving way to homes, factories, and distribution centers. Two

lane roads are being widened to accommodate traffic growth. Bob Harrell spoke earlier this morning of coming changes and their impact on the Midway community and our church.

In his 1970 bestseller *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler said, “Western society for the past 300 years has been caught up in a fire storm of change. This storm, far from abating, now appears to be gathering force.” People moving off the farms and into the cities because of the difficulty in small farming sustaining a family. Automation taking old jobs away and providing new but more specialized ones which require additional training. Organ transplants, pacemakers, artificial hearts. Space travel, computers. Radio, television, iphones, social media, and the internet. Through our present instant communications system many boundaries have been erased, so that when there’s a war or natural disaster a thousand miles away, we know instantly what’s happening.

Yes, ours is a world of change; and often it’s a world of rapidly increasing change. And it’s not merely the problem that doctors, executives, educators, ministers, and others can’t keep up with the so-called “knowledge explosion.” It’s also that you and I can suffer from what Toffler calls “Future Shock.” To be sure, change is a part of life. Birth...Childhood...Adolescence...Young Adulthood...Adulthood...Older Adulthood...Death. But studies indicate that too much change in a person’s life can lead to illness.

So what can we do in the face of such change? That is the question that this sermon seeks to address.

One thing we can do is to deal directly with the forces of change. As opposed to the way some of us are often just swept along by time and events, what if we sat down and actually formulated a plan to deal with life-pace today? Would it not help us to step back from the rat-

race and gain some perspective, evaluate our goals, and implement a plan? What about deciding that I'm not simply going to be shaped and dressed by every fad and fashion that comes along?

But to a certain extent the individual is limited in his efforts to stabilize. For staying in the old house or keeping the old car may bring exceeding repair bills. Or refusing the new job may bring economic hardship. So we need to act not merely on a personal level but also on a social level. Efforts need to be made in education, industry, business, and government to address the problems wrought in the wake of change.

One worthy endeavor is the grouping of people who have common problems to deal with, such as divorce, death, cancer, addiction, etc. The Alcoholics Anonymous organization has been very helpful in enabling people enslaved to drink, to lead fruitful, purposeful lives.

But what specifically can the church do in this rapidly changing society in which we live? Three things I want to suggest.

First, in the Bible, as reflected in our 46th Psalm, life was theonomous. That is to say, God was not merely a power on high—the Law-Giver or Judge—he was the very life of his people. He was the center, the foundation. And this is the challenge and appeal the church can make today. To say to people in this disorienting, rapidly-changing society, without denying our dignity and freedom, without presenting God as a kind of heavenly dictator, "*For in him we live and move and have our being.*" (Acts 17:20) St. Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless 'til they rest in Thee." God then can be known, not as an outside force imposed on us, but the very Ground of our Being. That's one thing the church can do.

Secondly, I think the church can serve as a *stabilization zone*. And while it's true that the church, if it is to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth, must sometimes be an agent of

change, it can't be that alone and fulfill its mission. In the face of the whirlwind of developments which threaten to sweep us up in its midst, we need such stabilization zones to provide a buffer.

The Church can point to Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. (Heb. 13:8)

As Paul says in 2nd Corinthians," we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." (4:18) The church can be a community of stability, where "even the sparrow finds a home." (Ps. 84:3) And this can be a significant ministry of Midway Presbyterian Church. Helping people find an anchor in the midst of vocational changes, family changes, health changes, and yes, changes in our roads and properties.

A related point is that the church can be a place where members feel they have a part to play. That their God-given gifts are important and valued. They're not merely bench-warmers or people who would never be missed if they disappeared.

For example, some people can communicate comfort where there is sorrow. Some people can communicate hope where there is despair. Some people can communicate fellowship where there is brokenness. Understanding where there is confusion, love where there is hostility. And together we carry out ministries of Worship, Christian Education, Congregational Care, Outreach, and Care for the Buildings and Grounds.

First, to find the Ground of our Being in God. Secondly, to provide a stabilization zone and a sense of place for everyone. And thirdly, perhaps the Psalmist expresses best of all what the church can do when he proclaims:

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 its mountains tremble with
 its tumult.

The church can proclaim that in the midst of all the change we face, we don't have to worry about a fickle God. Our peace is that God—in his wisdom, power, and love—does not change.

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
 There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
 Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not;
 As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.
 (Thomas Chisholm, 1923)

We're not sure of the precise event that inspired the Psalmist's well-known and well-loved words. Whether it was the occasion of the threat of some catastrophe of nature—earthquake or flood—or the terror of an enemy's siege. But we do know it was something that touched the depth of the human heart.

Sometimes change is barely perceptible—like a slowly receding shoreline. Frost, water, and wind can change the face of the earth. But only a person who has seen a violent separation of the earth's surface can fully appreciate the Psalmist's imagery. To feel a mountain shake or a crack run like a startled snake across a bare field, and to be caught up in the midst of things from which one is powerless to flee--this is to know man's insecurity in the wild elemental dance of nature. To ride out a hurricane or weather a tornado or lightning storm.

Our psalmist declares God's saving help in the presence of danger. And in verse 2 the community affirms, "Therefore we will not fear." That affirmation of faith speaks of the marvelous prospect that trust opens up. Concern and caution may exist, but trust will prevail.

We can deny the changing earth, the shaking mountains, the tottering nations, and deceive ourselves. We can laugh at them and deceive others. We can choose a life which will take away our freedom, and there are plenty today ready and willing to control us. We can choose a way which ignores the Ground of our Being. Or we can, as the Psalmist here, find God in the midst, the heart, the center of life.

“There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.” What the Psalmist has in mind is the life-giving fountain of God’s presence.

The holy habitation of the Most High
 God is in the midst of her,
 she shall not be moved.
 God will help her right early.

(Literally, “God will help her when the morning draws near.”)

The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
 (How terribly contemporary.)
 BUT the Lord of hosts is with us;
 The God of Jacob is our refuge.

His help is right early. He gives us the fountain of his presence. He gives us his church as a stabilization zone. He gives us valuable gifts for the common good. He is the Sovereign Lord, and the Ground of our Being. God is the Changeless in the midst of change. His love is steadfast, and nothing in all creation can separate us from that love of God that we know in Christ Jesus, Our Lord. (Rm. 8:38-39)

Let us close with Reinhold Niebuhr’s “Serenity Prayer.” May we pray.

*God, grant me the serenity
 to accept the things I cannot change,
 the courage to change the things I can,
 and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Amen. And Amen.