

*“Some things will change.
Some things won’t.”*

In the year 597 B.C., the Babylonians conquered and occupied the southern Jewish Kingdom of Judah. In the aftermath of their victory, they sent thousands of Jews into exile in Babylon. And included in that group was a man named Ezekiel.

Five years into the exile — and as we heard in our first reading — God called Ezekiel to be his prophet to those exiled Jews. And even though they were still clinging to the hope that God would somehow rescue them, and bring them home, and restore them to their former lives, Ezekiel was going to tell them something they didn’t particularly want to hear.

In essence, what Ezekiel told them was that their situation was the consequence of some rather bad choices they had made. For example, that they had turned their backs on God; and that they had forged political alliances with other nations; and that they had embraced the religious beliefs and practices of those other nations. And God’s message to them was simple:

“Change. If you want to get out of your mess,
then you’ve got to change the behavior that

got you into it in the first place.”

Well, change they did, and return home they did, but not until about 50 years had passed.

So, why did it take so long? Probably, it’s because when a nation — or even just your local community — has been embracing certain beliefs and practices for a significant length of time, it can be *very hard* to hear someone say that it’s time to change those beliefs and practices, *because change is difficult*. And even if the *reason* for the change is a good one; and even if the outcome of the change is clearly going to be a positive thing; changing is *still* a hard thing to do. Let me give you an example.

Before coming to Stillwater, Peggy and I spent 18 years in Kansas City, where both our girls grew up. When each went off to college, both chose the University of Kansas, which was only about 45 minutes away, so it sort of felt like they were still home. But when Laura graduated from K.U. and moved to Austin, and three years later when Emily graduated from K.U. and moved to Berkeley, it was really hard for us. And even though both decisions to move so very far away from their parents have paid huge dividends for them both, the pain of that separation, the pain of that change, is still very real.

Another example comes out of our reading from Mark’s

gospel. In it we heard a story that is repeated in both Matthew and in Luke's gospels. In a nutshell, this is what happens: Jesus preaches for the first time at his hometown synagogue, and things don't end well. I mean, at first they're all impressed: "Didn't he do so well?!" But then they remember that this is the same Jesus that they all watched growing up, and that's when things start going south: "And who are *you* to preach to *us*?"

Now, it's not clear, from Mark's telling of the story, why this change took place. But Luke's gospel pretty much spells out what happened. Luke tells us that Jesus had offered this reading from Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, [and] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Now, to be able to really appreciate what happens next, we need to remember that this passage from Isaiah had long been interpreted as a proclamation of God's promise to the people of Israel, *and* they inferred from it the belief that God cared only:

for the *Jews* who were poor;

and for the *Jews* who were imprisoned;

and for the *Jews* who were blind;

and for the *Jews* who were oppressed.

That is, that God cared only for *them*, for the *Jews*, and for no one else. And so, when Jesus followed his reading from Isaiah with what's been described as the shortest sermon in the Bible — that is, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” — it sounded as if Jesus was merely confirming what they had long believed.

However, Luke tells us, when Jesus then proceeds to remind them how, many years before, God had sent one prophet to help a *non-Jewish* woman during a famine, and how God sent yet another prophet to help a *non-Jewish* man who was sick, it begins to dawn upon the congregation exactly what Jesus is really saying: which is to say that God cares for *all* people, and not just the *Jews*. In other words, they began to realize that Jesus was challenging their long-held beliefs; that he was challenging their interpretation of scripture; and that he was challenging their very identity. And that's why they turn on him.

In Matthew's and Mark's versions of this story, Jesus is simply forced to leave town. But in Luke's version, they try to *kill* Jesus. His neighbors and friends try to kill him, because he's had

the audacity to suggest that they change their beliefs and practices.

Change is *that* hard.

Beginning last Thursday, and continuing through until Friday, representatives from Episcopal dioceses and provinces from all around the world are meeting as the 79th General Convention. The General Convention meets every three years, and it's the main governing body for the entire Episcopal Church. And, usually, when General Convention meets, changes are about to take place. And while it is hard to predict *what* changes will come about as a result of this gathering, one of the things we can do in the meantime, is to pray that the changes they make are *good* changes.

However, and no matter what happens at General Convention, the vast majority of what makes the Episcopal Church in general, and St. Andrew's Church in particular, unique, and endearing, and attractive, will not change: The love you feel here will not change; The welcome you receive here will not change; and the acceptance you experience here will not change.

A few years ago, the Bishop of Kansas offered up a sermon in which he described what he thought were the strengths of the Episcopal Church. I mentioned these in my sermon three years

ago, during General Convention, and I think they merit repeating.

This is what the Bishop said:

The Episcopal Church believes that “men and women are fundamentally equal in the sight of God, and that women as well as men should be able to serve in every office in the Church.” That won’t change.

The Episcopal Church believes that “age, race, sexual orientation, or disability shouldn’t keep anyone from having a full and equal place in the House of God.” That won’t change, either.

The Episcopal Church believes in “the power of both the Word of God preached, and in the Presence of God as revealed through the sacraments.” That won’t change.

The Episcopal Church believes “that the glory of God can be revealed through beautiful architecture, beautiful music, beautiful liturgy, beautiful art, and beautiful literature.” That won’t change.

The Episcopal Church believes that “churches should be built around the worship of God, and not around the charisma of any one clergy person.” That won’t change.

And, finally,

The Episcopal Church believes that “frightening imperfect Christians with the fiery flames of hell, or with crushing, unrelenting guilt is not only un-biblical, but un-Christian. This is a church where the *grace* of God trumps the *wrath* of God, and this is a church where God’s love has the power to redeem [anyone] and [everyone].” That won’t change, either.

However, having described some of the things that won’t change, I need to remind you that one of the hallmarks of the Episcopal Church is that *we do leave the door open* for the Spirit of God to lead us into an ever-new, and ever-changing, future. And we always have. For example:

There was a time when persons of color had no hope that they could participate in the life and ministries of the church. That’s changed.

There was a time when divorced persons could not be remarried within our Church, and receive God's blessing. That's changed.

There was a time when women could not participate in any meaningful way in the ministries or leadership of our Church. That's changed.

And yet, despite the changes that have taken place in our past, and despite the changes that will undoubtedly continue to take place in our future, we can still be confident. Because God's love for us all will not change. Our hope in Christ will not change. And by the grace of God, the fellowship we enjoy with one another will not change either.

And so, I hope that what you can take away from my remarks this morning is this: although some things may be changing in our beloved Church, other things, and, I think, the more important things, will not change, nor, by the grace of God, will they ever.

Amen.