

Signs of Change

In the lifetimes of most of us here in this sanctuary, the world we live in has changed dramatically. But in the last couple of centuries, the world's changed even more. Even though people said it wouldn't. I invite you to listen to these observations, and also to the years in which they were made.

In 1825: “What can be more palpably absurd than the prospect held out of *locomotives* traveling twice as fast as stagecoaches?”

In 1889: “The ordinary ‘*horseless carriage*’ is at present a luxury for the wealthy; and although its price will probably fall in the near future, it will never, of course, come into as common use as the bicycle.”

In 1901: “As a means of rapid transit, *aerial navigation* could not begin to compete with the railroad.”

And in 1926: “While theoretically and technically *television* may be feasible, commercially and financially, I consider it an impossibility, a development of which we need not waste time dreaming.”

Trains. Cars. Airplanes. TV. Today, these are realities most people take for granted. But once, they represented unimaginable change.

One thing about change: We don't always welcome it. Or deal too well with it. There's something in our human condition that wants things to stay the way they've always been, even if that way is less than perfect. But, my sisters and brothers, throughout this life, we can depend on the certainty of change. Bob Dylan had it right when he wrote that anthem of the nineteen-sixties, "The Times They Are A-Changin'."

The world has changed since Dylan sang that song. It's changed in the last two hundred years. And it's changed in the last two *thousand* years. For one thing, in biblical times, people didn't get weather reports on TV or on the Internet.

Now I often check the weather forecast on one of the local stations or online. But that's not always necessary. If I'm looking out the parsonage window, and if in the western sky it's coming up a bad cloud, I figure we're gonna get some rain.

The people in today's gospel reading know something about predicting the weather, too. If a desert wind's blowing in from the south, they say "heat wave!" But Jesus says they don't

do so well at interpreting what's actually going on in the times they live in.

Are we any better than they at discerning what God may be doing in the time *we* live in? This Sunday we hear Jesus confronting first-century people and *twenty*-first century people: *Don't tell me you can't detect a change in the season...we're in right now.*

Jesus has strong words for us today. Provocative words. Harsh-sounding words. We're not used to hearing Jesus talk this way. In fact, we're not used to this *Jesus*. Where's the gentle Jesus, the One who blesses children? Where's the tender Shepherd who carries little lambs on his shoulder?

The Jesus we hear today sounds very different. This Jesus lets us know—in no uncertain terms—that we don't get to turn him into whoever we *want* him to be. This Jesus surprises. This Jesus challenges. This Jesus frightens. But this, too, is Jesus! And this less familiar Jesus is teaching us about reading *signs* of change. In this time together today, let's consider these signs.

One of these signs is *fire*. When preacher Jesus begins by announcing: *I came to bring fire to the earth*, his sermon intro really gets our attention. Because fire terrifies. Fire evokes

images of judgment and of punishment. Fire has power to hurt and to kill. Yet its energy, when properly harnessed, offers comfort and protection from the cold. In a fireplace on a winter's night, fire provides light and warmth and beauty.

And in the biblical narrative, fire is a sign of divine presence. God shines forth, revealing Godself to Israel in fire. God speaks to Moses from a bush that burns, yet is not consumed. In a pillar of fire to light the way, God leads Israel out of Egypt by night. Before giving the Law at Sinai, God descends in fire, and smoke is thick upon the mountain.

Unpredictably, uncontrollably, this God appears. And, incarnate in Jesus, this God again comes, bringing fire.

Earlier in the Gospel, John the Baptizer has foretold the coming of Messiah who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. On the day of Pentecost, John's prophecy is fulfilled when Christ's fiery Spirit gives the church its birth. This fire, promised by Jesus, baptizes his apostles in the Spirit of Holiness. Cleansing. Renewing. Refining fire that sparks a new era. Fire that inaugurates God's kingdom.

And the One who proclaims this kingdom is the very One we know to be the Prince of Peace. So it's not easy for us to

grasp his meaning when he we hear him say that he has *not* come to bring peace.

When Jesus says this, what kind of peace is he talking about? Just what kind of peace is it that he's not bringing? Could he be referring to only a superficial kind of peace? Could he be referring to the kind of peace that's only a cover-up for the animosity festering just beneath it? In the prophecy of Jeremiah, the Holy One rebukes those who say: *Peace, peace, when there is no peace*. When people who disagree deeply stop acknowledging their disagreement, and call that peace, is it really? When the world stockpiles horrific weapons of death to protect what it *calls* peace, is that real peace? Or is it merely a temporary—and precarious—pause in conflict?

But it is the peace for which the world settles. And that's precisely why—on another occasion—Jesus tells his disciples that he doesn't give as the world gives. His is an altogether *different* peace. The world can't give the authentic peace of Christ—the true and lasting peace that will come when his kingdom is accomplished in its fullness.

We get glimpses of this kingdom before Jesus is even born. In this same Gospel of Luke, Jesus' mother Mary sings of what

his reign will look like. *He [brings] down the powerful from their thrones and [lifts] up the lowly. He [fills] the hungry with good things and [sends] the rich away empty.*

Well. The rich aren't going to like these reversals of fortune one little bit! And neither are the powerful. The exalted don't appreciate being humbled. Those who are heavily invested in highly profitable systems that exploit and oppress the least and the last are intensely interested in maintaining the status quo. They'll resist and oppose any change with every means at their disposal.

There *will* be division. Jesus tells us plainly that his coming will bring division. With the advent of a kingdom that's not yet fully realized, but already present, *division* is another sign, an inevitable sign of change.

For the kingdom of God differs diametrically from the world and its values. So different from the world is this kingdom that it can't *not* bring change to your life and mine. We're in the world. We're human creatures. And members of human families. We're sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, dads and moms. And so Jesus wants to be sure we understand that when we decide to follow him, *really* follow

him, that decision can impact even our most significant relationships . Maybe *especially* our most significant relationships. As E. E. Ellis puts it, “The call to decision is a call to division.”

Because if you’re a disciple of Jesus Christ, you belong to him. Every *part* of you belongs to him. To him belong your loyalty, your allegiance, your devotion. True commitment to Christ trumps commitment to a job, to an earthly empire, to even those closest to you. True commitment to Christ means that you may encounter opposition from all of these who expect and even demand to be your first priority. When that turns out not to be the case, what can result is discord. Dissension. Division.

You and I face these, just as Jesus faces them on every mile of his journey. A journey that grows more stressful with every step, for each one takes him closer to Jerusalem and to the baptism with which he is to be baptized: a baptism of suffering and death.

Beloved, you and I have died with Christ. In baptism, our former selves have died. We are among the baptized! Baptism by water and the Spirit is God’s sign of radical change—a sign

that a new creation has been born again from above. Born into new life in Christ Jesus.

Who is, himself, the final sign, the definitive sign that the old order is about to change. Through him, the old order is about to be overcome and overturned. As David Lose points out, “Jesus is born for one thing: to herald the coming kingdom of God, and to establish this reign he will hang on the cross, the vulnerable insignia of God’s new reign.”

Jesus is not only the herald but, in his own gracious self, the embodiment of this in-breaking kingdom. He is the one who is turning this upside-down world right-side up.

In Christ, nothing remains the same as it was before. *The old world is rapidly changing.* And we will indeed experience the division Jesus warns is bound to accompany this reordering. Our lives as individuals, our life as the community of faith are no longer tame and lame, stable, staid, and safe. Our lives are forged in the crucible of discipleship! We can no longer settle for remaining complacent and content with the ways of a broken world in desperate need of healing.

For we are a people of faith! And our faith is a vibrant, dynamic faith in the God who does not change. The God who is

still acting to save God's people. This radical, non-conformist, itinerant preacher, this God who hangs out with sinners and outcasts, this God who has died on a cross and has been raised, this God transforms all things. In all places. At all times.

And this God transforms you and me. This God calls us into a Spirit-blazed way of living. Ignited in service to the cause of peace and justice. Rekindled by the great good news of a kingdom that's still spreading like wildfire around the earth.

Signs of change are all around us. Can you read the signs of change? Can you *be* a sign of change?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.