**God and Change**

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**NPMC – Sept.15, 2019**

*Scripture:* [*Exodus 32:7-14*](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=279#hebrew_oth_reading)*;* [*1 Timothy 1:12-17*](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=279#epistle_reading)*;* [*Luke 15:1-10*](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=279#gospel_reading)

*Hymns: HWB 327 , HWB 299, StJ 27*

On the last weekend of summer, our family went on a short holiday to Drumheller, Alberta, to see the dinosaurs. My son in particular has an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the different eras of dinosaurs and their long, hard-to-pronounce names from various TV shows and books. My daughter is already showing an interest in “die-saurs,” as she calls them, too. So what better place to take them to for a weekend?

Well, I didn’t know I was headed straight into a theological conundrum! I know, I know. Who thinks about theology on a family holiday? Well, it’s just how I’m wired, I guess, but I do. You see, I learned a lot about the theory of how the dinosaurs became extinct, the event of a huge asteroid hitting the earth in the gulf of Mexico – an asteroid tens of kilometers in diameter that impacted 30 km into the earth’s surface. This impact caused massive earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, wind that would have shattered windows all the way up where we were in Alberta, had there been any windows back then, and filled the atmosphere with dust and ash for about ten years. This catastrophic event is thought to have caused the extinction of the dinosaurs, who would have either been incinerated on the spot, if they were close enough to where the asteroid hit, or slowly starved to death during the decade without proper sunlight. Scientists have discovered and theorized all of this based on a huge crater and a scorch line in the earth, marking the geological border between the time of the dinosaurs and the time when they were no more.

Now, I don’t doubt that something like this really happened – I trust the science. But what struck me as a person of faith was the question of where God was as this great catastrophe – this global change – was taking place. At first, I thought God must have orchestrated it, kind of like Noah’s flood – a fresh start to creating new animals after the era of the dinosaurs had run its course. But then, uncomfortable with that image, I thought, no, why would God be in control of that event any more than God is in control of current floods or other natural disasters? Instead, I like to think of God accompanying these creatures as they met their sorry end, and afterwards, starting over with creating creatures that would eventually evolve into human beings.

At the exit to the dinosaur museum, there was a large sign, saying something like, as long as there has been life on earth, change has been the only constant. That’s true, isn’t it?

This really is at the heart of our human experience – change is a constant in our lives, and can take different forms. Some changes are difficult and hard to accept: loss, illness, strained or broken relationships. Others are joyful, like new relationships, new, fulfilling work, new babies, recovery, reconciliation. Most are a mix between the two – we experience them as refreshing renewal, but also have “growing pains” as we adapt to things being different. Some of us know all about this as we adapt to new fall schedules these days. So, as people of faith, we wonder: where is God in the midst of change?

Believe it or not, the Bible asks this very same question. As some of our hymns this morning have reminded us, there have been many times in Jewish and Christian history when people have been overwhelmed by change and longed for a God who does not change. So we read in Numbers 23:19 that “God is not a human being, that [God] should lie, or a mortal, that [God] should change [God’s] mind.” And in Hebrews 13:8: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” This paints a picture of God as unchanging and therefore reliable – our Rock as we navigate the inevitable currents of change in our lives. There is something profoundly reassuring about a God who remains the same as we experience sometimes disorienting changes.

But, like so many other topics in the Bible, this is not the only statement that is made about God and change. This idea of God as unchanging is one strand in a larger conversation, which also includes the idea of God changing things for the better. So we read about this great vision of God creating or recreating a new heaven and a new earth, which comes up in Isaiah and the 2nd letter to Peter, and in Revelation’s vivid imagery. And we hear faith described as new life or walking in newness of life in the Gospels and especially in Paul’s letters to the early churches in Romans, Ephesians, etc. God is also the God of renewal and forgiveness, transformation and resurrection, which is the ultimate good news. When we feel trapped or worn down by different circumstances, we long for change, and we turn to God as the one who makes all things new! So God is both our unchanging Rock and the one who renews and changes all things for the better.

Our Scripture passages for today give us three biblical snapshots of what change can look like for people of faith. So let’s take a look at how these passages talk about God and change:

**Snapshot 1: Moses Talks God into Changing God’s Mind**

Maybe many of us remember this story from Sunday school – this is from the classic golden calf story. Moses is up on the mountain, speaking with God and receiving the Ten Commandments, and down below, the people literally can’t wait for him to descend with the stone tablets outlining how they are to live. They gather all of their gold, melt it down, make a golden calf statue, and begin to worship it. God is so frustrated! Here God is, trying to communicate the Commandments to God’s people, and they break the first one before Moses has even had a chance to write it down. It’s like when you ask a kid to not touch something and turn your back for one second, and they’ve not only touched it, it’s also all over their face and the wall!

So, God is ticked off and ready to give up. God says, maybe I’ll just make a great nation from you, Moses. To heck with the rest of these people! I’m going to burn them up with my wrath because they are so “stiff-necked” – stubborn and thoughtless!

But Moses steps in and talks God down. Yes, that’s right. Moses comes in as the voice of reason, reminding God how it would look to the Egyptians if God had just saved the Israelites from slavery only to burn them up with wrath in the desert right away. “Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people.” Then, Moses reminds God about God’s own promise to multiply the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel (or Jacob) and lead them into the promised land. And it works. God changes God’s mind, turning away from wrath and disaster. But notice how this works. Moses isn’t so much changing God here as reminding God about who God really is – the God who liberates the oppressed and keeps life-giving promises. God changing God’s mind here is in fact reassuring, because it means God remaining a God of steadfast love.

**Snapshot 2: Paul Talks about His Radical Life Change**

Our second Scripture passage is from the First letter to Timothy, who was one of the leaders of the early church alongside the Apostle Paul. It involves Paul humble-bragging about how sinful he used to be – he used to be the worst sinner, he claims. Granted, his story is one of a very radical conversion or change. You may remember that Paul used to be a rather zealous Pharisee, who took part in persecuting the early Christians. Then he had a moment of meeting God in a (literally) blinding light on the road to Damascus, and this changes his life completely. Rather than trying to stamp out and destroy the fledgling Christian movement, he turns his energy to building it up, becoming one of its key leaders. And now, in this letter, he is expressing his gratitude to Jesus Christ as one who strengthened him, judged him faithful, and gave him a way to serve. To use very traditional language, Jesus saved him from his life of violence and sin, and in grace and mercy, gave him a new and different path. Paul holds himself up as an example: if Jesus can change my life, there’s no one who is too far gone or beyond the patience and love of God!

Here we have a picture of a God who has compassion even on the most wayward of people. God’s love dramatically transforms Paul’s life. Does it shape and transform ours, too? As theologian Dorothee Soelle once said, the key question of faith isn’t “Do you believe in God?” but rather, “Do you live out God?”[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Snapshot 3: Jesus Welcomes “Sinners”**

Our final Scripture passage for today is related to what Paul talks about, but slightly earlier, in Jesus’ time. Jesus is being criticized by the Pharisees and the scribes for spending time with those they considered “sinners.” He’s meeting with tax collectors – people collaborating with the occupying Romans to take money from their own people! He’s meeting with prostitutes, and women and children living in poverty, and people with diseases, and people recovering from mental illnesses, and with Gentiles or non-Jewish people. These were all of the people who were in fact forbidden from entering the central courts – the holier parts – of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Pharisees and the scribes were trying to keep them out – and here Jesus was, inviting them in, spending time with them, eating with them, discussing God with them around the table. As the late Rachel Held Evans once said, “What’s offensive about the Gospel isn’t who it keeps out. It’s not who it keeps away from the table, it’s who it invites in.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

These religious leaders of Jesus’ time found it hard to change their vision of what faith called them to. As those who benefitted from the power and prestige of the purity and holiness system of the time, they didn’t want things to change. But Jesus tells two parables about God: first as a shepherd, rejoicing over finding a lost sheep, then as a woman rejoicing over finding a lost coin. God has no interest in maintaining the status quo and hierarchies that exclude the most vulnerable, those who are struggling! Rather, God rejoices when those very vulnerable ones find life, because God is a God of unchanging compassion, a compassion that seeks out and finds those who are lost.

As you might be aware, this past week was declared Mennonite Heritage Week by the Canadian government. It’s been really interesting to read different articles about what this might mean, since there are different understandings about what it means to be Mennonite. Does it have to do with only Mennonites of Germanic heritage? Well, this doesn’t take into account that there are more Mennonites of African heritage today than European![[3]](#footnote-3) The Mennonite church today is very multicultural. Is it only about Mennonites who are baptized members of churches, or does it include those who are culturally Mennonite but not involved in a faith community?[[4]](#footnote-4) And so on.

What struck me is that Mennonite identity is not something static or fixed. It’s something that has changed and evolved over time as people of our faith tradition have found themselves in new circumstances, being called to new ways of living out their faith, new ways of being Mennonite in different times and places, and in different generations. Sometimes, this has been experienced as a loss – things can’t remain the same, and we struggle to let go. Other times, there’s been a sense of renewal and of experiencing the unexpected movement of the Holy Spirit opening up surprising new possibilities for what it means to live out Jesus’ Way of Peace. We try to take the best of our tradition and carry it forward into our time and place, and not to repeat mistakes in our collective history. This is how we honor the “heritage” of being Mennonite, whether cultural or religious or both. So take heart, friends, no matter what changes you are wading through these days. The God of unchanging compassion will remain by your side through all of it, transforming your struggles into rejoicing. Where is God in the midst of change? Right there with us, always. AMEN

1. Dorothee Soelle, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/person/rachel-held-evans> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/mwc-census-shows-increased-numbers> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/life/faith/mennonite-heritage-week-creates-division-511055531.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)