

Following the announcement last Sunday and the possible relocation of the church, we are about to undergo some major change. So I got to thinking about all the changes that have taken place just in our lifetime. In addition to the computer, fifty years ago we have put a man on the moon; we have phones that are smarter than we are; we have devices that can control all the lights and appliances in our home when we are out of town; we have 24 hour non-stop news and information through cable TV, Facebook, and intragrams; we have cars with navigational systems and back-up cameras; and then there is one of the greatest inventions – duck tape.

However, sometimes don't you want to go back to the good ole days? A grandfather was talking to his grandson: "You know in the good old days, you could go to the store with just a single quarter and get a loaf of bread, a dozen eggs, a gallon of milk and a brand new bike. But today, you can't do that; nope, there's just too many surveillance cameras."

Let's face it, constant change is here to stay and we are right in the middle of it. So in the time we have this morning, let's discuss change. Do you like change? Most of us don't; we like to stay in our comfort zones; we like things to stay the way they always have been. Someone said that the only one who really likes change is a wet baby.

A reporter once interviewed a 90 year old layperson. He said: "Grandpa, you've seen a lot of changes in the church in your lifetime, haven't you?" "Yeah, Sonny, I have. And I've been agin' every durned one of them." Like this old man, we may fight change, but whether we like it or not, we are constantly experiencing change in our lives and the church. So this morning, let's look at what the Bible tells us about handling change. In particular, let's look at the guidance that the Old Testament Prophet Jeremiah provided centuries ago to a nation and people undergoing major change.

Jeremiah was a priest and is often called the "weeping prophet" because of his self-analysis and self-criticism. Jeremiah was called to be the voice of God when everybody else was turning their backs on God. The Assyrian Empire had just collapsed and was being replaced in power by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar. In 597 B.C., the nation of Judah was captured by King Nebuchadnezzar and many of the people were taken into exile in Babylon. However, Jeremiah was not taken into exile and remained in Jerusalem. In the 29<sup>th</sup> chapter of his book, Jeremiah writes a letter to those in exile. Listen to his words of guidance as recorded in verses 1 and 4 through 14.

Read Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14

Our text describes the people of Israel who were carried into exile in a strange land. They find themselves in places and situations that they didn't want to be in, and all they wanted was for things to go back to normal. Their world had been turned upside down, and they had been uprooted from their comfort zone. You may be feeling the same way this morning; things are changing with regards to your family, health, job, finances, retirement and the church; and they may never be the same again.

The author of the Serenity Prayer that we read earlier must have been familiar with these kinds of situations. While some books such as our hymn book do not give him credit, the story is told that Reinhold Niebuhr, a former professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, jotted down a few lines for a prayer that he was to offer at Sunday worship. After the service, someone asked to see a copy of the prayer which Reinhold had folded up and put in his pocket. The shorter version has become one of the most familiar of all modern American and Christian prayers: "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."

Before we focus on those things we can and cannot change, let's not rush past the first word in this prayer. For the first word "God" is the hope and power of the whole prayer. The road to acceptance of changing situations is difficult enough by itself, but the journey will be even more difficult if we forget the most important first word, if we forget God. God is the One who provides us with the wisdom to know what can and cannot be changed. James 1:5 states: "If any of you lack wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault."

The Serenity Prayer is often used by Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 step groups. People are at those meetings because they need a Higher Power to help them accept the things they cannot change and to change those things that can be changed. They have realized that alcohol does not help you accept unwelcome circumstances, nor does it help change circumstances. God and God alone is our hope and power for acceptance of unwelcome circumstances, and the courage for what can be changed.

"God, grant me the serenity to accept what cannot be changed." Let's face it, there are some things in our lives that we must learn to live with because they are not going to change any time soon in the near future, if at all. One of those things that we really can't change although some people go to great expense trying to is our looks. Some people are beautiful, and then there are the rest of us. If you don't think that God has a sense of humor, look at the person on either side of you.

And also, let's face it, we will all grow old whether we like it or not. Max Lucado tells about the time that he bent over to straighten the wrinkles out of his socks and realized that he wasn't wearing any socks! Another thing that some of us are stuck with is our accent. If you haven't

figured it out over the past year, I'm a redneck from the south. Now Judy, on the other hand, can change her accent depending on who she is talking to; her accent gets stronger when we go back to South Carolina.

Our Scripture text for this morning deals with living in the midst of difficult circumstances that were not going to change any time soon. Jeremiah reminds us that God's way is not always the way we would choose. The children of God were in exile, and God sent word through Jeremiah that they would not be leaving Babylon for quite some time; seventy years to be exact. So in his letter, Jeremiah provided guidance for living in circumstances that would not be changing any time soon.

When we have to live with situations that cannot be changed, we, like the recipients of Jeremiah's letter, feel like we are living in exile. Perhaps we can remember better times, and we long for those times in the same way that the Israelites longed for their homeland. Thus, these words from Jeremiah apply to us today as well, even if we are not exiled in some foreign land. Our exile may be a financial situation, a strained personal relationship, an illness such as cancer, depression, or other personal problems.

The first thing Jeremiah says to the exiles and to us is to acknowledge and accept the fact that some things are not going to be changing any time soon. Now this advice may be just as difficult for us to comprehend today as it was for the Israelites back then. Most of us usually do pretty well if we can believe that the difficult times are going to end soon. And most of the time the difficulty or pain does pass. But how do we live with things that will not change; and our exile goes on and on?

Realizing that some things may never change means that we should not spend our lives idly waiting for things to get better. The prophet tells those in exile not to put their lives on hold: "Go ahead and build houses; you will be there for the full thirty-year mortgage. Plant a garden; you will still be there when the green beans are ready to be picked. Let your sons and daughters marry and have children; enjoy your grandchildren." In other words, get on with your life!

In essence, Jeremiah is saying that if we do not learn to make peace with our current situation, we will never have any peace at all. Accept your circumstances; they cannot be changed. But you can live faithfully within them. Through Jeremiah, God offers a word of encouragement in times of change, life goes on; make the best of the situation; every day is a gift from God, make the most of it!

Now Jeremiah gives us words of comfort that even in the midst of whatever situation we are currently in or whatever change we are undergoing, God is with us and that there is always hope. It is the foundation of our faith that despite all evidence to the contrary, this is God's

world; He's still in control and He holds our future in His hands. The Apostle Paul assures us in the eighth chapter of Romans that nothing in this world will ever separate us from the love of God, which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. He is with us even in the changes of life.

In this prayer of an old professor, we also pray for the ability to change things that we can change. Though there are times when our circumstances cannot be changed, there are times when things can and should be changed. However, as we discussed earlier, nobody likes change; it can be frightening at times. But change is necessary to live in this ever-changing world of ours, and if we are to fulfill the plans God has for us as a church. We are basically a work in progress. God has a plan for us and for this church, and in order to accomplish it some changes such as moving next door must be made. In reality we have outgrown our current space, and if we are to grow as a church, we need to expand. Like clay in the hands of a potter, God has been molding us over the past year and will continue to mold us in the coming years into the disciples and church that He needs here in Rio Rancho.

Have you ever watched an artist painting a landscape scene? As they proceed to color the canvas with deep browns, reds, and yellows, the picture begins to take shape. After a while, the picture looks complete and you think that the artist has perfectly captured the landscape, but then the artist adds some paint and you immediately think that she has gone too far and ruined the picture. But as the artist continues to add texture and other colors, the part of the painting that you thought was ruined looks great. The extra paint was exactly what the painting needed to make it beautiful and complete.

Now isn't life like that? Many times in our lives, after many struggles and hardships, we come to a place where we are comfortable. But as we rest in our comfort zone, God decides to make some changes, and of all things, without consulting us first; changes that we didn't expect and definitely didn't want. And our first reaction is "Lord, You are ruining the picture!" But if we allow God to continue His work on the canvas of our lives and this church, to our surprise, the picture begins to look better.

Of course, there are times when some changes never look good to us and perhaps never will. During these times we must remember that God is still painting the picture. The picture of our life is not finished yet. We must walk in faith knowing that when we finally meet God face to face, our painting will then be complete and beautiful. In the meantime, we can take comfort in knowing that every situation, though it may seem bad, is paint in the hands of the Master Painter that can be used for His good. The Apostle Paul stated it best in Romans 8:28 – "And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." Paul also wrote those encouraging words that we discussed last Sunday: "No eye has seen, nor ear has heard, no mind conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him."

A long-time member of one church criticized the new pastor for his radical new ideas and changes: "Reverend, if God was alive today, He would be shocked at the changes in this church!" That person missed two key points: first God is alive today, and secondly, God hopes and expects that all churches will continue to change and grow. On the other hand, the devil loves those churches that don't change, the complacent church; the church whose motto is: "that's the way we have always done it," or "let's return to the way it was in the good old days."

God has a plan for us and High Desert. As I noted last week, God is opening a door of opportunity for us; an opportunity to expand our facility and ministry next door. Let's face it; it's time for a change. I have found from experience that if you walk in faith, wait on the Lord, be patient, trust in the Lord, then something good will come out of every situation and every change. Lord Jesus, take this church, use Your brush, and paint a masterpiece! Amen