

“When Change is Normal: Lessons From a Time of Anxiety”

Luke 21:5-19

Rev. Ryan Landino, Presbytery Leader of Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery

LaDue Chapel Presbyterian Church

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⁵ When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, ⁶ “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

⁷ They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” ⁸ And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.

⁹ “When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” ¹⁰ Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; ¹¹ there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

¹² “But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. ¹³ This will give you an opportunity to testify. ¹⁴ So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; ¹⁵ for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all because of my name. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

The words of the day are: *normal change*. That sounds funny, because if it's normal, then by definition it's not change, and if it's change, by definition it's not normal. Either way, I don't like it I don't want it.

Phillis Tickle in her book "The Great Emergence" talks about every 500 years, there is a major cultural and religious shift that is marked by change and anxiety. From the days of *Exodus* to the *Davidic Monarchy*, to the *exile*, to the tiny moment of *the birth of Jesus*, to the *institutionalization* of the church, to the *East West split*, to the *Protestant Reformation*, we can track each five hundred year shift to the present day.

Do you know where we are since the last big one? We are at 506 years this month... we are right on schedule for next, major, religious change again. We are living that now, handing the reins of the church over to whatever the church of Jesus Christ is gonna look like for the next 500 years. We don't know what, but we know it will be different.

Part of what I love about being Presbyterian Church comes from is how intentional our system tries to be about facilitating change for the next generation. (It's also why I have to buy a new Book of Order every two years, but it's ok!) Because change is normal.

Yet at the same time, the Book of Order is only one half of our constitution. The second part, the Book of Confessions hardly ever changes. The Nicene Creed, the Apostle's Creed, the Barmen Declaration, are core historical expressions of our faith will ALWAYS be a part of who we are.

And that's the point. There are some things that will ALWAYS change and some things that will NEVER change. The trick to living the life of faith is properly figuring out which is which. What should *stay*, and what should *go*. What is helping our growth as disciples of Jesus Christ, and what is holding us back from being who we truly are.

Part of the challenge is that change is hardest when we don't have a solid sense of what we can still hold on to. A friend of mine once reminded me that fear of change isn't really fear of *change* at all—it's fear of *loss*. Loss. The loss that comes with change. It is possible we struggle with change because we haven't been able to grieve what we have lost, are losing, or are afraid of what we might lose---all without fully knowing who we are or what we will still have on the other side of that loss. So if change is normal,

then that also means that *loss* is normal. Which means that grief is also normal.

As a pastor for eight years before becoming a presbytery leader, I've done countless funerals for beloved church and members of the community, there is always pain and loss because of how much things have now changed, sometimes suddenly. But what gives comfort just about EVERY time is when we remind each other what NEVER changes. "*Nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus Christ.*" "*We have a house of God NOT made by human hands, ETERNAL in the heavens.*" Scripture is always reminding us, no matter what....there are certain things we can count out to never change.

And that's what is happening in this passage from Luke. Jesus takes them—and us—to that temple of change, and says look at those huge stones that weigh 500 tons each. Look at the stained glass and the jewels and fine thick carpets and the beautiful curtains. Yea, all that—will be taken away from you.

Naturally this terrifies the disciples. This is that fear of change, that their fear of loss. Which is *valid*.

What is Jesus doing? He takes us right into our fears so that God can put them in their place. It reminds me of how one of our favorite psalms tells us that God doesn't lead us AROUND the valley of the shadow of death, but directly *through* it.

In that valley, facing the structures that may and will change, facing normal change, knowing the toll that will take and the labor that will require, there are things Jesus wants us to remember.

First is that, yeah, even the **most reliable structures in our lives may crumble**. The temple, the community, our family structures, so many things we depend on to be there *can* change. But part of the process of facing that, is feeling empowered to know what will ALWAYS be there. Jesus says trust ME, I AM THE TEMPLE. We can trust Jesus. But we just might need to let some things go in order to do that.

Next, he literally says in verse 9 “**do not be terrified**,” Fear makes us forget who we are, and Whose we are. In times of anxiety, embrace the healthy fears, but manage the unhealthy fears.

Then Jesus says: **beware false prophets**. When religion shifts, power shifts as well. “False prophets”, as they are named here, are those who have an historic record of always showing up in times of anxiety while power is shifting. They use faith language not to promote faithfulness but to gain power. Beware those who would deceive you into forgetting who we are and Whose we are.

Please take a breath with me. [breathe]

Because fortunately that’s not the end of the story. We hear in verse 15 the need to **be open to the Holy Spirit working through us**, which is it’s the truth that God is still with us. Fear makes us forget that God is never done with us. The Holy Spirit may blow us to some uncomfortable places, but if 4,000 years of Biblical tradition tells us anything, it’s that the Spirit always surprises us with what is new and what is next.

Finally, we must **hold the course**. Jesus says by your endurance, we will gain your souls. I like here the Hebrew understanding of soul: that souls are our bodies, minds, and spirits, because Jesus was about healing bodies, minds, AND hearts. Our faith is an “all-in faith.”

I want to close with a kind of test about how well you are holding up under change. It will be an experiment. I will ask five questions, and if you resonate with it on any level, give yourself a point. Then at the end, we will add it up and I will tell you what your results mean. Do you want to try it?

1. If you are experiencing grief, the pain of loss, or the loss that comes with change, and you are in need of comfort...give yourself a point.
2. If you feel you are at or nearing your threshold for how much change you can take... give yourself a point.

3. If you've ever been gripped by fear and anxiety about the future of the church, or feel that what was lost in our church life won't come back... give yourself a point.
4. If you have questions about the future that you still feel are unanswered... give yourself a point.
5. If you are doing fine—you are ok, holding your own, doing alright... give yourself a point.

If you scored 0 points, you are loved by God and God is with you.

If you scored 1-2 points, you are loved by God and God is with you!

*If you scored 3-4 points, **YOU ARE LOVED BY GOD AND GOD IS WITH YOU!***

If you scored ALL 5 points, you are loved by God. And God is with you.

Because no matter what, God staying with you through normal change has been God's way of working in the world since the beginning. Know that through it all, we've been here before. Jesus is STILL with us. Still teaching us, walking with us, still guiding us, still correcting us, still dying for us....still raising us to new life.

So hang in there, You got this. Your God is with you until the end.

Amen.