

SEPTEMBER 28, 2008  
PENTECOST 20  
68<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY SUNDAY  
“CHANGE YOU CAN BELIEVE IN”

Using the opening words of the beautiful Tanzanian hymn we sang a couple of weeks ago, let us pray:

*“Gracious Spirit, heed our pleading,  
Fashion us all anew.  
It’s your leading that we’re needing,  
Help us to follow you.”* In Jesus’ name  
I pray. Amen.

“Change” is a word we’re hearing a lot of these days—especially from the candidates for president nominated by our two major political parties, both of whom are touting themselves as agents of change. And “change” seems to be the order of the day—even “seismic” change, as it’s sometimes described, in the capitalist so-called free market economy of which we’re participants, as financial systems totter and even free market ideologues, opposed in

principal to government intervention on issues like health care or the minimum wage or welfare or climate change suddenly have been converted to seeing the wisdom of massive governmental intervention in our supposedly formerly “free market” economy. Some private enterprises, it seems, are simply “too big” to allow to fail and so 700 billion dollars that could not be found for improving the education of our children, for providing health care for all, for shoring up our social security system and medicare, for funding alternative energy sources and beginning the transition away from behaviors that fuel global warming, and a host of other pressing issues, all will move even further to the back of the bus of our national priorities as the salvation of our “too big to fail” formerly private financial institutions becomes our urgent #1 national priority — no matter that everyone agrees that these private companies and their richly compensated leaders are clearly responsible for the behaviors that led us to this fix. And

who knows? It just could be that such action is necessary and as urgent as it's claimed. Who really knows?

My point is that we're in the midst of change—seismic change—whether we want it or not. So the issue becomes “how do we respond to change?” Reactively, resistantly, reluctantly fatalistically, grudgingly or stiff-upper lipingly, embracingly, welcomingly, positively or optimistically—or something in between—or in some way quite at odds with what our world sees as change?

Turn around and look at our old red banner hanging from the balcony, a banner that I understand was created for an earlier anniversary. Was it our fiftieth? Cleverly it was created out of some old, no longer-used, altar cloths and paraments, and what is it's message, its good news for not only that anniversary Sunday long ago but for our 68<sup>th</sup> anniversary today—and, of course, good news for everyday? **A CHANGELESS CHRIST FOR A CHANGING WORLD!**

Which is also, of course, the answer to

what our attitude is to be toward all the change going on around us and within us—including the church itself—regardless of our political affiliation, our economic status, our personal temperament, our tolerance for diversity and ambiguity and conflict—we are one in Christ, a changeless Christ into whom, as Brother Martin never tired of saying, we are baptized, God’s baptismal promises then becoming our “anchor” in life keeping us safe and sound amid life’s tumultuous and stormy changes.

“Change,” I was surprised to discover from my dictionary, derives from the Latin word “*cambire*” —an originally economic term that means “to exchange or barter” —an interesting irony, don’t you think? Only then does it take on connotations in English like “to substitute” and “to cause to become different,” “to alter” and—get this one—“to **convert**.”

One of our presidential candidates has adopted as his campaign’s slogan “Change We Can Believe In”, which despite its

dangling preposition that is a grammatical offense to all English majors, does at least seem on the face of it admit that change is a given but the real issue is what kind of change. Of course, “believing” in change is a bit silly itself—at least for us Christians for whom “believing” or “having faith” needs to have God as its object or it runs the danger of becoming idolatrous. As Mark Twain once put it so memorably when someone asked him if he “believed” in infant baptism. “Hell,” he reportedly said, “I’ve seen it!” Believing that change happens, in other words, is not quite the same as “trusting” or “putting one’s faith” in change, is it?

But those of you with very good memories may remember that as recently as last week’s OT reading from Jonah we learned how “God **changed** God’s mind about the calamity” that God had sent Jonah to the Ninevites to declare over their evil ways. And we went on to discover how Jonah’s initial resistance to heeding God’s

call to go to Ninevah and his later pouting in the wake of their repentance—a word that means “change of mind” and “change of heart” leading to “change of behavior”—was that Jonah knew in his heart of hearts that Yahweh was “a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing” as both Jonah and our psalmody testified—“ready to relent” being another word for “ready to change.”

In other words, ours is a God, ours is a Christ, who is “changeless” not in the sense of being eternally static, immovable and immutable but rather “changeless” in the sense of God being ever gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing” which means that God is ever ready to do what God needs to do in divine wisdom to accomplish God’s purposes for good—as we discovered in the climax of the Joseph story a couple of weeks ago—in which God is disclosed to be the continually creative God,

creative enough even to create good out of our evil.

This is the God whom Moses encountered in the burning bush and asked for the divine name to take back to his people. “Yahweh” is my name, the divine Voice said. Yahweh which is really no name at all but a **riddle**—and a **promise**. “I AM WHO I AM” the Voice said, which might just as well be translated, “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE” meaning I AM a God who goes before you into the future, a God not confined to the old ways of doing things.

This was discomfiting news for Israel of old, as we find in today’s OT reading from the prophet Ezekiel in which God “disowns” a proverb of old: **“The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge?”** This was a time-tested saying from the wisdom tradition of Israel that taught the conventional wisdom that actions have consequences, even to the third and fourth generation—which in Ezekiel’s day had become an excuse for bad behavior.

You know such excuses, I'm a victim of an unhappy childhood, of my genes, of my bad schooling—or Flip Wilson's old, “The devil made me do it.”

No—Ezekiel says—the old proverbial truth is passe as a way of rationalizing your own failures and bad behavior—you can't pin it on God, putting God at fault. You have individual and personal responsibility for your actions regardless of your background, regardless of whatever circumstances to which you were subject. “*O house of Israel, are my ways unfair?*” Yahweh asks through Ezekiel, God's prophetic voice? “*Is it not your ways that are unfair?*” The eternal, unchanging God, you see, is in the change business—in the business of changing the hearts and behavior of his beloved and chosen people—his “change agents” for the sake of the salvation of the cosmos.

Jesus, I hope you saw in our Gospel reading for today, initiates a clever little dialogue with the chief priests and the elders

of the people—the guardians of the religious status quo in his day, notice—regarding the source of his authority, which he casts into a bit of tricky repartee regarding the authority of John the Baptizer. All this is followed by his even odder little story about the man who had two sons in which the religious leaders seem to be cast as the second son who says he’s going to do his father’s work in the vineyard but never ends up doing it.

I hope you noticed the extended punchline to the story: *“Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; And even after you saw it, you did not **change your minds and believe him.**”* The Gospel of the Lord. *“**You did not change your minds and believe him**”*—change you **did not believe in** because it was change you wouldn’t believe in because of who was

drawn to such change—the tax collectors and prostitutes.

This is the Christ to whom St. Paul testifies in today’s NT reading from the famous 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter to the Philippians when he writes: *“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”* Talk about “change” — what ancient theologians came to call “**the great exchange**” of God’s nature for our human nature—that is the basis, the medium of exchange, for our **redemption**—redemption being, of course, yet another economic term that means the price of our being bought back out of slavery—the price paid for the ransom of someone who’s been kidnapped—the price of our rescue, our salvation—a price paid

not only by our redeemer but with the very life of our redeemer taking our place. Now that's "change — an **exchange**--I can believe in."

"*Therefore,*" Paul concludes, because of this great exchange, "*God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*"

Now that sound like a good place to end, but Paul being Paul, isn't content to leave it at that but goes on with yet another "therefore": "*Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me (I detect a hint of sarcasm there), "not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, **work out your own salvation** with fear and trembling"* — what I always think sounds a bit more like works righteous James rather than Paul. But wouldn't you know Paul is pulling our legs—he's messing with our

minds—for immediately after “*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*” he goes on to announce to us the good news “*for it is **God** who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*”

That’s good news for us today on this 68<sup>th</sup> anniversary Sunday and it’s good news for everyday—**change**, indeed, **in which** we can believe!

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.  
Amen.