

On the Rise: Focusing Our Energy

Preached by

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United Church of Fayetteville

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For Reflection: *“The secret of change is to focus all of your energy not on fighting the old, but on building the new.”*

Socrates

“Since we cannot change reality, let us change the eyes which see reality.”

Nikos Kazantzakis

Hebrew Scripture Reading: *Deuteronomy 34:1-12*

³⁴Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, ²all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, ³the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. ⁴The LORD said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.”

⁵Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command. ⁶He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. ⁷Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. ⁸The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended. ⁹Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses. ¹⁰Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. ¹¹He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, ¹²and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Epistle Reading: *2 Corinthians 5:11-21*

¹¹Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences.

¹²We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. ¹³For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Meditation: *On the Rise: Focusing Our Energy*

A number of years ago the Pew Foundation surveyed Americans about their attitudes toward change. Not surprisingly, the responses suggested complexity but the analysts' conclusion was that we think "Change is good unless it happens." Perhaps part of the problem is that we often try to evaluate change as good or bad instead of simply accepting that change happens. We'd like change to be both predictable and in our control.

Sometimes, when change is predictable, we don't even call it that. We call it growth or development. Babies are born totally dependent on their parents and caregivers. We clap at every milestone—first smiles, rolling over, sitting up. Then comes crawling and we clap again. But there are little whispers of grief. They are a little less dependent on us and perhaps not quite as safe as when they couldn't go anywhere we didn't take them. And, so it goes. Even if they don't make the celebration pictures of first days of school, tears can be seen in most parents' eyes. There are academic, physical and social activities and kids learn to win or lose, make friends, or go it alone, making more and more decisions on their own. Then come drivers' licenses, graduations, career and partner choices and perhaps children of their own. At every stage there is more independence for parents and children alike accompanied by far less control of the other on everyone's parts. For everyone, there is a sense of accomplishment, a sense of joy and an awareness of old things passing away—that is to say there is also grief, and perhaps uncertainty about what the future holds. We tend not to think of that as change, because its stages are predictable. Even these changes are not remotely controllable, nor would we want them to be. The alternatives are not to be borne. What happens in our households is radical, constant change which requires constant adjustment, response and growth on everyone's part, and most of us navigate it pretty well.

Yet, when we leave our households and become active in school, in the workplace, community and world, our capacity to navigate change drops precipitously—probably because there is no one to define what is typical change, there is no apparent predictability and we have no illusions of control. So, we often do something we would never dream of doing in our own households. I know of no one who would keep their child from learning to crawl, because crawling would lead to walking and we know at the end of that progression is a request for keys to the car so they don't have to walk everywhere. Nor would anyone take a child who had learned to walk and create a crawling-only environment. Yet when change comes in the rest of our lives, our first instincts are to force it to a halt. If we fail in that effort, we dig in our heels and try to push back time.

Our Hebrew scripture reading talks about the people's anticipated entry into the Promised Land. They are understandably excited, but we shouldn't forget the great grief that was their reaction when they left Egypt. Yes, there was freedom from slavery. There was also freedom from being provided for, having meat and not worrying about dying in the desert. The text also points to new leadership rising. Moses' day is done and it is time for someone new with different skills to take the lead. While in this text, Moses' inability to enter the Promised Land is framed as a punishment, it is the story's acknowledgement of new circumstances.

In a few weeks we will be ordaining and installing officers for the Board. Some are continuing, some are new. With different people, different gifts and a different "mix" of leadership there will be "change."

There is no one here who can't list as well as I the changes that have happened in the culture, the church and the community that have impacted the way people do or don't do church in these days. We want to be careful not to assume, or demand that our officers undo change or turn back the clock. The only predictable thing about change since the beginning of time is that it happens. The only control over change we have is the change we make in ourselves.

If I were to make suggestions about that change in us as individuals and a congregation, they would be:

*insofar as we are able, we focus our energies on recognizing change itself is neutral—neither positive or negative.

*insofar as we are able, we use the same approach to change around us as we do in our personal households: claim the positive impacts of the change for all parties; cheerfully and consciously acknowledge the things we won't miss; and grieve the ones that we will. Grief and uncertainty are natural responses to change and as long as we aren't paralyzed by them, we are equipped for the lives we are called to lead.

We might also want to embrace and expand our understanding of Paul's message. Paul wrote: ¹⁷*So if*

anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! He wrote about a new relationship with God through Christ and thus being made new. By choosing a new way, God was calling us and Paul was reminding us that change is necessary even in relating to our God. Perhaps more subtly, he pointed out that when something wasn't working, God didn't insist on sticking with it, but tried a new way. If our God dares to do a new thing, try a new way, surely, we can as well.

Paul continued: ¹⁸*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation;* ¹⁹*that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.*

We have been called to a ministry of reconciliation. I suspect part of that reconciliation for us and for the sake of the world is for us to accept the world as it is. Paul argued that God in Christ works positively in the world, not counting its trespasses against its inhabitants. For us I suspect that means surrendering our litany of loss and ceasing to keep count of all the ways the world and the church aren't like they used to be.

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The early Israelites didn't have a clear vision of what life in the Promised Land would look like. They didn't know exactly what would be demanded of them. Nonetheless, they trusted God who is always doing a new thing, and their proven capacity to navigate change and entered in.

As we move into the future trusting our God, who is always doing a new thing, promised that God is with us now and will be in all the days ahead, and trusting in our own proven capacity for change, may we do no less.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Loving God: In the changing seasons, in changing lives, we find ourselves busier than ever, trying to finish some things, while beginning others. We feel ourselves pulled forward and backward and sideways, and seeking rest, find ourselves not wanting to move it all. Voices call us to stop and start and come and go and we want to cover our ears. We have tried to do so much, forgetting that we do not do it alone. We need your help being faithful. We need the power of your compassion to care for one another. We need the strength of your arm to reach out.

In the silence, let us give all other agendas and ourselves a rest...

In the silence, let us still the clamor inside, and wait for a sense of your presence...

In the silence around and within us, let us listen for your voice...

In the silence, may we find the will and purpose to follow where you lead

By the silence, and by your Spirit, may we find peace and breath and hope refreshed.

All this we pray in the name of your Son, who taught us to pray together, saying...

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day, our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil,

for thine is the kingdom and the power

and the glory forever. Amen.