

“The Challenge of Change”

a sermon by

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Text: “...in those days, says the Lord, they shall no longer say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the Lord.’ It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made” (Jeremiah 3:16).

This morning I want to hold before you two texts taken from the Old Testament. Both have to do with one of the most venerable institutions in ancient Israel: the Ark of the Covenant.

The first text is from the book of Joshua, where we read, “Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord until evening” (Joshua 7:6). The Ark of the Covenant was a sacred ark that Moses had made of wood. It contained the tables of the law (The Ten Commandments). The Ark of the Covenant symbolized the presence of God. It was often taken into battle with the people of Israel as a way of guaranteeing the presence of God in the midst of trouble. When King David was the ruler of Israel, he brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. When King Solomon built his magnificent temple in Jerusalem, he placed the Ark of the Covenant in the center. It was the “holy of holies.” It symbolized the presence of God in the holy city.

The second text is taken from the prophecy of Jeremiah. By this time 600 years had passed. Speaking of the Ark of the Covenant, Jeremiah had this to say: “In those days, says the Lord, they shall no more say, ‘The Ark of the Covenant of the Lord.’ It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; it shall not be made again” (Jeremiah 3:16).

There is obviously a clear contrast in these two texts. On the one side, Joshua has his faith identified with that sacred ark. Where the ark goes, affirms Joshua, there God goes as well. On the other side, is Jeremiah, ardent prophet of the living God. For Jeremiah, the Ark of the Covenant is meaningless. He is glad that it is gone. He does not wish for it to be remembered or to be built again.

I.

There is something quite profound in the reading of these two texts. In many ways they represent one of the most fundamental challenges of Christian discipleship, the challenge of distinguishing in our faith the difference between the things that change and the things that do not change.

A number of years ago, when I was a student at Union Theological Seminary, there was a tradition at the school called “The Senior Sermon.” In those days each graduating senior had to preach a sermon before the whole student body and the faculty as well. After the sermon each faculty member was invited to give a critique of the sermon. Understandably, this was not something that most students looked forward to. It could be a grueling and sometimes very difficult situation. Along the way, however, students learned something very important about “The Senior Sermon,” namely, that the faculty were far more interested in arguing with each other than with giving a critique of a student sermon, which most of them did not think very highly of anyway. Some of the arguments between faculty members were very highly entertaining and students enjoyed the “give and take” among members of the faculty.

I remember talking several years ago with Dr. John Leith, a long-time professor of theology at the seminary, about these exchanges. Looking back on them, Dr. Leith observed, these issues were never really quite as important as they seemed at the time. One particularly intense debate centered on the arrival of a professor of Pastoral Counseling. This was the first time in the history of the seminary that a person with a secular degree (a Ph.D. in Psychology) was allowed on the faculty, and there was a lot of opposition to this change. On another occasion there was a heated debate about preaching. Dr. Donald G. Miller, a very outstanding professor of the New Testament, was a real stickler about sermons following a Biblical pattern. He insisted on what was called “expository preaching” where the content and the outline of a sermon had to follow exactly the passage of scripture that was the subject of the sermon. Arguing on the other side was Dr. Leith, who did not believe that a sermon had to follow in a rigid way a passage of scripture. Leith, in his own characteristically blunt way reminded the audience that he had once preached a sermon on the painter Rembrandt.

I thought of those debates recently when I read an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* published a few years ago entitled “The Search for a No- Frills Jesus.” In that article the author, Charlotte Allen, interviewed a number of scholars who are part of the so-called “Jesus Seminary,” a group of New Testament scholars that are determined to separate the “real Jesus” from the “Jesus of the church.” This group of scholars believes that only about 20 percent of the sayings of Jesus in the New Testament are authentic. They do not believe in the miracles or the resurrection. They do not even believe that Jesus was crucified. One of the members of the group, Burton Mack, a Professor of New Testament at the Claremont School of Theology in California, summed up his own findings by saying, “It’s over. We’ve had enough apocalypses. We’ve had enough martyrs. Christianity has had a 2,000 year run, and it’s over.”

II.

So, let's be clear. There are some things that do not change. The writer of Hebrews summed this up by saying, "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever." Recently, I came upon a remarkable book, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters*, by Luke Timothy Johnson, who teaches New Testament at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. Johnson points out that in spite of the fact that so many people today decry the creeds of the church as being archaic and irrelevant, they serve a fundamental purpose in the church. They remind us of our basic beliefs.

From earliest times faith communities have used creeds as a way of stating their faith. One of the earliest creeds in the scripture expresses the faith of Israel: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4).

The same is true in the New Testament. The basic affirmation of the early Christian community was contained in a creed consisting of three words: "Jesus is Lord." The Roman Empire required all of its citizens to affirm that Caesar was Lord. But the Christian community would not do that.

As Presbyterians, we believe that there are some very basic aspects to our faith that are not subject to changing times: our confidence in God's sovereignty and grace that undergirds all our life; the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as God's revelation of his love and might; the authority of scripture as a rule of faith and guide to our lives; the conviction that our lives have dignity and meaning and are lived in the purposes of God. These are things that we hold dearly.

The music of J.S. Bach provides us with an analogy of this truth. Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor consists of a number of variations on a short theme. At first the theme is distinct and clear. As the variations unfold, and the music becomes more complicated, the theme is harder and harder to distinguish. Soon the music seems to have no direction or purpose whatever. But if one is already acquainted with the theme, he can hear it through all the apparent chaos, holding the music together, giving it direction and force.

That is how we understand our faith. Even when life seems chaotic and without direction and purpose, we hold fast to our conviction of God's revelation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Christian believes that the theme is still being played, even when our own ears can scarcely detect it. God's mercy is forever sure.

One of the most impressive stories that has come to my attention within the past year was reported by *Christianity Today* some months ago. It was the story of a young thirteen-year-old girl in Indonesia who was part of a growing ring of child prostitution that is taking place in so many parts of the world. She left her family to visit a relative and was taken against her will into one of these prostitution homes where she was held captive for two years and forced to engage in unspeakable acts. When she was finally liberated from her captivity, her liberators found a small room where she was forced to live. On the wall of the room they found written these words from the Psalms: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1).

Over the past year I have thought of that young girl, whose name I do not know. But whenever I think that I am facing some difficult situation, I remember her words and believe that if a thirteen-year-old girl can have that kind of faith, then I can have it as well.

III.

But while there are things that do not change, there are those things that do change. Jeremiah understood that. The Ark of the Covenant that had sustained Israel's faith through all those years was no more. Jeremiah understood that keeping the Ark is one thing, but keeping the faith is something else. Jeremiah kept the faith. He carried it to a new day and lifted it higher than it had been lifted before. He became a forerunner of the Christ. He kept the faith, but he did not keep the ark.

Through the years the church has honored those individuals who through faith and prophetic insight have enabled society to discern the things that are transient from the things that are eternal. In his Christmas Eve Sermon this past week, Bishop N.T. Wright of the Church of England paid homage to one of the greatest statesmen in English history, William Wilberforce. It was 200 years ago that Wilberforce almost single-handedly brought an end to one of the greatest moral and social evils of his times, the terrible slave trade that had so handsomely profited England. For 20 years he had worked diligently against this horror. He had made speeches against it in Parliament; he had introduced countless pieces of legislation, all of which were defeated. But in 1807 the Parliament of Great Britain voted to end the dreaded slave trade for all times.

As we prepare to enter a new year, there are many challenges before us as a nation, a community, and a church.

As a nation we face challenges of war, the economy, and the environment. As a community, we face the challenges of insuring that the growth and prosperity of our city are also extended to those who are homeless and under the dreaded curse of urban prosperity.

As a church, we face some remarkable opportunities in the coming months. There are currently 10,000 people living in the Uptown area. In the next five years that number grows to 15,000. Within the next 20 years it is estimated that 100,000 people will be living in Uptown Charlotte.

There are few, if any, churches in Urban America today that face the incredible opportunities that our church faces today. Therefore, we are challenged to cling to the things we know to be eternal, while remembering that there are many things that are transient.

May God give us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.

Amen!