

Sermon  
Easter 5-C  
St. Andrew's  
May 15, 2022  
William Bradbury

Acts 11:1-18  
Psalm 148  
Revelation 21:1-6  
John 13:31-35

In the original hymn "Abide with Me", there is a line that goes:  
"Change and decay in all around I see, Oh, thou who changest not abide  
with me."

And in these days, change and decay are in all around we see: Covid reemergence with a million US deaths, inflation, a mass shooting in Buffalo by a White supremacist killing 10 folks, most who committed the crime of shopping while Black; Putin's war to destroy Ukraine; and a leaked Supreme Court draft opinion creating deeper culture wars at home.

**In such times**, people of faith are right to grab onto God as the one unchanging reality in the universe.

As another hymn puts it, "Rock of Ages cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee".

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In recent years, however, I've come to the understanding that this image of an unchanging God is misguided and damages our ability to follow Jesus, who has a different understanding of his Abba.

You'll remember his out of the box conversation with the five times divorced Samaritan woman at the well when he offers to give **her "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."** John 4

The Book of Revelation has God say, "To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from **the spring of the water of life.**"

**This moving, living water is the Spirit of the Living, moving God.**

Unfortunately, the church too often finds the image of God as flowing and ever changing too challenging, so the Church scoops up a bucket full of this living water, puts it on the altar, and proceeds to worship and protect it.

True, it once was the living water of Life, but now it is stagnant water not fit to drink, much less worship.

Jesus's invitation to the woman at the well and to us, is to live in the flow of God's Spirit—challenging us to continue to listen to and evolve **into the Spirit's call.**

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**We have a perfect example of this in our story from Acts:** From the time of Abraham, Jewish boys were circumcised to demonstrate the community's allegiance to God's Covenant. Further, the Bible clearly says that if a Gentile wants to become part of God's community he must be circumcised too.

Peter believes this with every fiber of his being, just like he believes the dietary laws in Leviticus that prohibit eating shell fish and pork.

Peter has no reason to think these Biblical laws have been changed. Jesus dealt with Gentiles and even helped them, but he didn't teach against circumcision, nor does he teach it's okay to eat bacon for breakfast.

So, Peter, the Rock, is shaken to his core when he has a vision of unclean animals that God tells him to kill and eat. He resists this temptation, and says, "By **no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.**"

Yet the vision happens two more times, so Peter finally realizes **God is doing a new thing.**

**God is doing a thing** never known for over 1000 years.

Therefore, in obedience to his vision, Peter goes into the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and before he finishes the first page of his sermon, the Spirit falls on the whole household of uncircumcised men and pagan women.

Now Peter says, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, **who was I that I could hinder God?" So he baptizes them all.**

**If Peter had been what is known today as an Originalist, he would have ignored the heavenly vision, held firm to the original Biblical text and never baptized uncircumcised Gentiles.**

Southern preachers in 1850 knew that the Bible approved of enslaving persons, since even Abraham and Sarah owned Hagar, who was forced to have Abraham's child, and therefore slavery **must be the eternal will of the never-changing God.**

Like the bumper sticker that reads: "The Bible said I, I believe it and that settles it."

**But to his lasting credit after an hour of prayer Peter allows the Spirit to open his mind to a deeper understanding.**

**Our God continues to lure us out of long-held beliefs, so that we might enter ever more deeply into the fullness of God.**

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Of course, someone will quote Hebrews 13:8 that says, "Jesus is the same, yesterday, today, and forever"?

What doesn't change is his love, but how that love is expressed is continually changing.

Here's an example I heard: A mother loves her child "the same yesterday, today, and forever", but she acts very differently toward the infant who needs his diaper changed than the twenty-something living on her own.

Same love, but changing expressions of that love.

Paul writes in Galatians 3:23-27: "Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup> Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be reckoned as righteous by faith. <sup>25</sup> But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, <sup>26</sup> **for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.**"

And, therefore, Paul says, "Walk by the Spirit... And if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law."

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But in order to walk in the ever-flowing Spirit, we must stop idolizing that bucket of stale water. We must realize that God is not in the business of making my "Me" secure and happy, by keeping everything the same, but rather God is in the business of pulling us into the River of the Spirit, so that so that we might stay open and grow into the full stature of Christ.

The whole Biblical story points to this: Abraham is told to leave his home and go to the strange land of Canaan.

Moses is told to go back to Egypt where Pharaoh has a warrant for his arrest.

And Jesus is told to go to Jerusalem and face the power of Empire and Church with only the powerlessness of God.

God wants to take away our certitude, our confidence in a religion and a nation that never changes, so that we can move with the flow of God who says in Revelation: **"See, I am making all things new....**To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."

This letting go decenters us which is neither fun nor easy—for a person or a parish. It is by definition disturbing when God cracks open the hard shell of who we think we are, in order that we might experience our becoming in Christ.

**Here's the deal:** Shall we continue to worship that old bucket of stale water or as another old hymn says, "shall we gather at the river?

Where "God is among mortals and dwells with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away."