

NO STOPPING CHANGE

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John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." (Mark 9:38)

One of the world's most recognizable buildings is St. Paul's Cathedral, the great domed church that dominates the London skyline. In 1675 the architect Christopher Wren laid the foundation stone of what would be his life's work. For the next thirty-three years Wren would preside over the construction of St. Paul's. It would be a bold departure from the tradition of gothic architecture. Finally, in 1708, Sir Christopher's son would set the final stone in place at the apex of the lantern above the dome. By then Christopher Wren was 76 years old, but age wouldn't stop him from guiding Queen Anne on a royal tour of the cathedral. After they had inspected virtually every corner of the massive structure, the architect inquired of the Queen's impressions. According to one Wren biographer, she responded with three adjectives that went straight to the point: "It is awful. It is artificial. It is amusing."

Imagine how Christopher Wren reacted upon hearing the Queen use such words to describe what he'd hoped would be his greatest achievement. Was he devastated? Not at all. Instead, he breathed a sigh of relief, and thanked the Queen for her gracious words. You see, in 1708 the word "awful" meant awe-inspiring, or awesome. The word "artificial" meant artistic, and the word "amusing" meant amazing.¹ Awful. Artificial. Amusing. Once upon a time these words spoke the highest of praise. Today they convey the lowest of insults. The words are the same, but the changing times have brought entirely new meanings to the words.

In today's readings from Scripture we encounter not words, not adjectives, but people living in a changed environment, and struggling to adapt to it. In the Old Testament Book of Numbers, the changed environment is the Sinai wilderness. The Israelites were wandering through this inhospitable land, having escaped from slavery in Egypt. The conditions were harsh; any food but manna was scarce; no sign of the Promised Land was in sight. But one would think the new landscape would be infinitely preferable to the short, bitter, disposable lives they had lived as slaves in Egypt. One might think so, but it wasn't true. The Israelites reacted to their changed environment by retreating into flights of nostalgic fantasy. They remembered life in Egypt the way it never was: *We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic (Numbers 11:5)*. They remembered their slavery as if it were a poolside party with tropical drinks. Gone from their memory were the hard sufferings and afflictions that made them cry out to God. Forgotten were the endless scorching days of making bricks without straw until they dropped. The Israelites dealt with their present by looking at the past through rose-colored glasses. The failure of human memory was on full display.

Joshua, son of Nun and assistant to Moses, was among the Israelites wandering in the desert. In addition to dealing with the new landscape of the wilderness, Joshua also wrestled with deeper changes that were taking place. To this point it was the custom of the people to gather in one designated place called the tent of meeting. In this place they would encounter the Lord. But as we hear today in Numbers, the spirit of the Lord spilled out of the tent of meeting and rested on two men not even present in the sacred space. Eldad and Medad began prophesying out in the camp. This new development was beyond the control of Joshua and Moses. How did Joshua react? He implored Moses to stop them: stop that praying, stop that prophesying. We've never done things that way before!

In today's reading from the Gospel of Mark (9:38-48) we hear much the same reaction to a new situation. John, the brother of James and son of Zebedee, was a feisty, ambitious disciple of Jesus. Yet for all of his enthusiasm, John and the other disciples had recently been unable to cast out a demon that was possessing a man (9:18). Then, some days later in their travels with Jesus, John and the others came across someone unknown to them – someone outside their fellowship – casting out demons in the name of Jesus. What they had failed to do, this outsider was doing with ease and in abundance. Once again, the Spirit could not be contained, neither within the tent of meeting, nor within the little band of twelve disciples. How did John react to this new development? The same way as Joshua: Stop it! Stop that praying and prophesying! Stop casting out those demons! Stop doing good works in the name of Jesus! So it is that the Israelites, and Joshua, and John all resisted change.

If you haven't already guessed, this is a sermon about change. Change can be a tricky topic. Some people want it, and they want it now. Others have a harder time adjusting and adapting. This past summer it was decreed by forces at work beyond my control that my office computer was hopelessly out of date. Yes, my old familiar friend that I used for email, for writing sermons, and for researching fascinating historical trivia like the bit about Christopher Wren and Queen Anne – that very computer was judged to be no longer any good. I protested. It worked just fine. The unused icons were exactly where I wanted them to be. They gave me comfort just by showing up in the same place on my screen every morning. Nevertheless, our IT consultants counseled me that the old crate was vulnerable to viruses, wouldn't run the latest programs, and my monitor was too small. That's right, I needed a wide-screen monitor if not two so that I could have four documents open at once. It was time to upgrade. It was time to change. So now I have a new computer with the latest operating system and a big, wide screen. Do I like it? Actually, no. The screen hurts my eyes. Some days, for magical, mystical reasons the computer does not connect to the server. Most of all, I resent that every time some little crook in Silicon Valley decides that things need to be faster, bigger, and brighter, I need to go wandering through the wilderness of change.

Change is difficult. But I would be compromising the gospel if I didn't preach it. I would be unfaithful to the message of Jesus if in any way I tried to assure you that we can find our ultimate security in the way things happen to appear on our screen today. We can't. Neither could the Israelites, nor Joshua, nor John. Nothing stays the same. A few years back the television star Alan Alda wrote a memoir called, *Never Have Your Dog Stuffed*. He derived the title from a childhood incident when his beloved family dog named Rhapsody suffered a premature death. Alda and his dad took the dog's body out to bury it, but their grief was so great they couldn't do it. Instead, they decided to have Rhapsody stuffed so they could keep him forever. Weeks later, when the finished product arrived at their home, it was all wrong. It was awful and artificial in the modern sense of the words. The taxidermist had given the dog an angry, rabid expression he'd never shown in life. What is more, the constant sight of the snarling, stuffed Rhapsody was making it harder to remember the living animal they had loved and known. For the young Alan Alda, it was an early lesson in how you can actually lose your life by trying to stop the clock and save it. Never have your dog stuffed. He had to let go. We all eventually have to let go of the way things are.

So what about the kingdom of God in a changing world? What about it endures? What about it abides, even as the world we know continually passes away? Let me suggest some unchangeable truths at the heart of the kingdom. The first is the simple affirmation that God is in control. God always has been, and God always will be. The necessary corollary is, we are not in control. The Israelites thought perhaps they should be in control. They saw the changes taking place in their midst as a sign of God's losing control. They thought the conditions in the wilderness were awful. Moses would point to the manna from heaven as awe-inspiring. Joshua and John also thought God was losing control. Joshua and John judged the prophecies, prayers, and exorcisms of those outside their camp as artificial, perhaps even amusing. It was a breakdown in God's

authority. But Moses and Jesus knew differently. They saw the uncontainable nature of God's word as artistic and amazing. They knew that God is in control. Even in times of rapid, seismic change such as our day, you can count on God's being in control.

Here's another unchangeable truth at the heart of God's kingdom: the good old days are today. That's my highly paraphrased translation of Psalm 118:24, which you know better as *This is the day which the Lord hath made: let us rejoice and be glad in it*. This is the day. Today. Not yesterday. Not tomorrow. Today. When the Israelites put on their rose-colored glasses and remembered a fantasy version of their slavery in Egypt, they never would have imagined that their descendants would put on the same rose-colored glasses and idealize the very time in the wilderness they were now rejecting. They didn't realize that they were living in what a future generation would call the good old days, as are you and I right at this very moment. You may object. I understand. It's hard to imagine that anyone will ever look back and romanticize our current state of affairs. Ours is a time of deep disillusionment in the political process, in the dumbing-down of American culture, and in the failure of institutions – including the church – to lead us through the wilderness. But when we conclude or even suspect that the world is going to hell in a hand-basket, what we are essentially doing is rejecting God's gift of today. Remember this: no matter what the changes taking place in your life, no matter how fiercely the river of time rages and foams, the Lord of hosts is with us – today. This is the day which the Lord hath made: let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Finally, a third unchangeable truth at the essence of God's kingdom: God has a special, unshakable favor for little ones. God always has, and God always will. God is especially protective of those whom Jesus, in Mark, calls "little ones who believe in me." In fact, God's concern for these little ones is so passionate that Jesus says anyone causing one of them to stumble would be better off being thrown into the sea with a great millstone around his neck. It would be better for you to cut off your hand or foot, or tear out your eye if these were to cause you to make a little one to stumble. The extreme hyperbole is intended to emphasize how much God cares for the little ones. Point well taken. It sounds simple enough: don't trample on the little ones.

But here's the problem: it's entirely unclear exactly who these "little ones" are about whom Jesus speaks. In the context of Mark's reading, they could be the advocates of change, or they could be the resisters of change, or they could be the impressionable, innocent bystanders to all the arguments – even the child sitting on Jesus' knee at the moment (9:36). The "little ones" could be the outsiders doing the work of Jesus in new, unconventional ways. Or they could be the insiders like John and Joshua who tried to conserve the community as they'd known it. It's unclear. And that is all the more reason to treat everyone as if he or she were a little one who belongs to Jesus. Especially in this day and age, treat everyone as if he or she was a little one who belongs to Jesus. Doing thus, we might all experience the inevitable changes and chances of life as redemptive, not reckless.

In 1708, Queen Anne's words to Christopher Wren were music to the architect's ears, but they are nothing you'd want to hear today. Times have changed. Today's Scripture lessons from Numbers and Mark also remind us that we participate in an existence that is constantly changing. God is in control of it. God is acting within this very day. God has a special favor for the little ones, whoever they may be.

Our Lord does have a day in mind when God's new Creation will be completed, when we stand before him, changed from glory into glory: awesome, artistic, and amazing in his sight.

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¹ The story about St. Paul's Cathedral is told by the Rev. John Claypool in his book [God is an Amateur](#).