

ADAPTING TO CHANGE

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Psalm 137:4

The philosopher Heraclitus lived in the city of Ephesus some five hundred years before Paul would visit and found a church. Heraclitus' most famous aphorism is, "We cannot step in the same river twice, for by the second step the river has moved, so neither the river nor we are the same." Heraclitus primary teaching is about change. All things he taught are in flux.

We are now entering nine months of preparing for a major change. Kathleen and I will both be retiring at the end of May. We do not know exactly what this will look like for us. You as a congregation are preparing for new leadership that will take you in directions that you cannot imagine today.

When Judith and I sat down to plan worship for these last nine months, we thought of a special series for the fall. We are going to focus on times when the people of God have had to adjust to change. All through Christian history, the church and the people of God have learned to adapt to new circumstances.

Today we begin with a story from the Old Testament. In this story Jeremiah helps the people come to terms with what is called the Exile. Jeremiah was born in 655 BC in the village of Anathoth in the southern Kingdom of Judah. By this time the northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed by the Assyrians. Judah was now alone. Early in Jeremiah's ministry there was a king on the throne of Judah who is actually given good reviews in the Bible. Josiah came to the throne and instituted some real reforms. During his reign a book of the law that had been lost for years was discovered. Scholars believe what was found was the book of Deuteronomy. It was read before the people. A religious revival, not unlike the great awakenings in America, took place. Idols were torn down and the behavior of the people improved. It was a time of hope.

But like many such movements, this religious revival faded and Judah started to go back to its old ways. Jeremiah preached doom for the people. He warned:

Take warning, O Jerusalem, or I shall turn from you in disgust, and make you a desolation, an uninhabited land. ⁹ Thus says the LORD of hosts: Glean thoroughly as a vine the remnant of Israel; like a grape-gatherer, pass your hand again over its branches. ¹⁰ To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? See, their ears are closed, they cannot listen.

Jeremiah saw the rise of a new world power in Babylon. The kings of Babylon slowly began to defeat the nations in the Middle East. Finally, in 586 BC the Babylonians captured Jerusalem. They destroyed the temple built by Solomon. They gathered a large percentage of the ruling class and forced them into exile in Babylon. Jeremiah was not among those who were taken into exile. He remained in Judah under house arrest.

The exile in Babylon was a fundamental crisis for the people of Judah. They wondered how they could follow God in this new circumstance. Remember that the Jewish religious life of the day centered on the Temple. The heart of their relationship with God was in the yearly cycle of feasts celebrated at the temple. How could their sins be forgiven if they could not sacrifice at the temple?

In these totally new circumstances they wondered what were they to do. So, Jeremiah writes to them from Jerusalem:

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Jeremiah encourages the people to live out their faith in the situation where they find themselves. In the face of challenging circumstances, they are neither to give into the fight or flight responses, but rather to make a new beginning where they find themselves.

I believe that Jeremiah's words relate to our experience living in post-Christendom America. You and I have not been forced to leave our homes to live in a foreign land, but in a very real way the world has changed around us. If you were born before 1968 or so, you are now living in a very different cultural context than the one in which you were raised.

Those who are over sixty today were raised in the last days of what is called Christendom.

What is Christendom? In the west, Christendom was born on Christmas Day in the year 800 AD. On that day in Rome, Charles the Great, otherwise known as Charlemagne, was crowned Emperor by Pope Leo III. This was the beginning of creating a unified Christian culture in the west. Up to this time Christians were not necessarily the majority religion in Europe. Christians existed as a minority in a very pluralistic culture. There were various pagan religions among the Franks, Celts and Germanic tribes. Spain was still largely ruled by Moslems.

What was different about Charlemagne? After all there had been other rulers who had been Christian. Charlemagne was the first who took an active part in truly creating a Christian culture.

Charlemagne had great gifts for organization. He helped to give us the church organization we have now. Some have credited him with creating the parish system where a church and priest are responsible for all the people in a geographical area. They are responsible to a diocese, then to an archdiocese. By the end of his reign there were twelve French Arch-Bishops, five Italian and four German, all in his empire.

Organization was brought to worship. There was a new liturgy developed that was used throughout the empire. The search for good order led to regulation of the everyday religious life of the people. This meant the beginning of infant baptism being the norm for all. The record of a person's very existence was the baptism registered in the parish. It was during these years that some practices began to be expected of all people including: abstaining from work on Sunday, confessing sins, communing three times a year, and tithing.

Charlemagne surrounded himself with capable people; drawing scholars from other countries such as Spain, Italy and Britain to promote learning in his kingdom. He encouraged the growth of schools. He encouraged the spread of the Bible in its Latin translation.

The political and economic stability led to a flourishing of the arts and architecture. The Christian Gospel served as inspiration for artists and churches were built in Roman and Byzantine styles. There is evidence that the earliest musical notation began in this period.

All of cultural, political, economic and ecclesiastical life flourished. It was Charlemagne's vision that all the major players in society would be united in creating a culture shaped by the Christian Gospel. This vision is what has come to be called Christendom.

Christendom lasted a very long time. For Protestants in America, Christendom ended only in the 1960's. We have not even begun to adjust to this reality. This is especially hard for reformed Christians. During the 500-year history of the reformed tradition we have been in charge of the culture in which we lived.

The Reformed Christian Church set the agenda for the larger American society. The values of our understanding of the faith shaped how the political structure was organized, the values promoted in the arts and what the schools taught. There is no doubt that a Reformed Protestant Christendom was established in our country. The best proof of this was the fact that Roman Catholics and Lutherans found it important to create their own schools in the country. Why, because they knew the public schools were designed to inculcate the values of Reformed Protestant America.

The banning of prayer in the public schools,
The repeal of blue laws that changed the nature of Sunday,
The replacement of Christian themes in the arts,
The raising of pluralism as a supreme value.

These are all indications that the major actors in our society no longer see themselves as part of a common cultural enterprise. Christendom is over.

Let me be clear. I do not believe that there are necessarily fewer committed followers of Jesus in our country today than 100 years ago. What is different is that faith is relegated to private life and the church. This is a unique experience for reformed Christians. All of our Church practices, all the ways we do Church are based on a culture where everybody is presumed Christian and all forces work towards the same goal. How are we to react to the new cultural reality?

First, we should mourn the loss of Christendom. Was Christendom perfect? Of course not. There were many aspects of Christendom that were oppressive and not reflective of the Gospel. But we should mourn that cultural synthesis that gave us Chartres, Bach, Michelangelo, and our Constitution. We have lost something and we feel a yearning and sadness living in a post-Christian culture.

Secondly, we should give up trying to re-build Christendom. I believe that so much time and energy have been expended over the last forty years trying to restore Christendom. That is largely what the culture wars have been about. There have been so many Christian groups in America who have felt the change taking place and strove to turn back the clock.

In my more than forty years as a minister, one role I have played has been as a grief counselor to the institutional church. Congregations and denominations have all seemed to go through stages of grief over the loss of Christendom. Some people have tried to live in denial of the

loss. Others have gotten angry. I have worked with congregations that declined for years, woke up to the fact, and then turned their anger on whoever was in leadership at the time. I have seen congregations in the bargaining stage. They seek some magic program that will turn everything around and change the cultural reality. There has been infighting among Christian groups and leaders. Jerry Falwell and Bishop Spong had opposing theological perspectives but they had the same goal. They both wanted to go back to the 1950's and put Protestant Christianity back in control of the culture.

I believe that it is time for us to give up that struggle. We must realize that we are living in a new situation. For the foreseeable future we will be living in our own Babylon. We will be living in a pluralistic culture in which the major players in society will not see the Protestant Church as a primary influence. We will be in the situation of most Christians in the mission field today or during the first seven hundred years of Christian History.

We are in many ways in the same position as the people of Israel in exile in Babylon. The temple in Jerusalem, which served as the heart of Jewish life, had been destroyed. The first reaction of the people was to mourn as the Psalmist said, **By the Waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.**

After mourning they asked a crucial question, **How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?** In Judah, the core of the faith was centered on the temple with its festivals and sacrifices. It was during the exile that the Jews created the synagogue and its worship shaped by reading Torah. They preserved the faith by creating new practices. The exile gave the Jewish people gifts that still shape them today.

I do not have answers as to how we are to live into our new cultural reality, but I have thoughts about the process to follow.

First, we are to acknowledge we live in a new reality and then we need to begin to rethink how we do everything. Our form of church life was created within the context of Christendom. We will have to find new ways to understand –

How we see ourselves in relation to the world?

How we do mission?

How we share the faith?

How we educate our young?

How do we grow in our faithfulness?

And more.

I believe that we live in very exciting times. The path forward is not clear. It can be painful as we give up cherished ways of doing things, but we have an opportunity to create new models, new models of church that are faithful to Jesus in a changed reality.

In all likelihood, your next pastor will have never lived in Christendom. He or she will bring new ideas to help shape your common life for the future. Be open to change.

The people of Judah didn't have the temple to center their relationship with God. We do not have Christendom to shape our lives. We live in new circumstances. This is our challenge to learn to sing the Lord's Song in a strange land.