

SWIMMING IN THE WATERS OF CHANGE

Isaiah 43:18-21
Revelation 21:1-5

Kelly B. Brill
Avon Lake UCC
24 August 2014

Last Sunday we celebrated my dad's 84th birthday. On Monday I had lunch with my son Michael before he went home. As we were talking about my parents, Michael said, "Just think about all of the history and all of the change Grandpa Bob has experienced in his lifetime." My dad was born less than a year after the stock market crash. The Depression took place during his early childhood. He was 11 when the United States entered World War II. How do you even keep track of the changes since then? From a party line phone to a phone in every pocket. From watching TV with rabbit ears to watching TV on Netflix. People born since 1930 have witnessed the civil rights movement, the influx of women in the workplace, the movement towards equality for same-sex couples. Air travel has gone from a luxury to something commonplace. We could spend the rest of the morning listing the changes.

It all can seem rather overwhelming, especially the changes that affect your daily life, your daily routine. Several people told me last year how upset they were when the Cleveland Plain Dealer announced it was canceling daily home delivery. A couple of women said to me, "But what about the puzzles? That's what I do every morning with my coffee after breakfast!"

While it seems like we are living in an era of rapid change, the truth is that it's almost impossible to maintain perspective on how our times compare to other eras. When you read history, you can see that in every period of time, there have been people

who have felt overwhelmed by change, and people overwhelmed by the challenges surrounding them.

Where is God in all of this? What help is our faith when we feel besieged by change, when we can't find a firm place on which to stand?

One default position is to look towards the past. You hear people say, "There was a time when people were more religious, when more people went to church." Those comments are often based on perception, not necessarily upon fact. People look back in nostalgia, on the good old days, and find God there.

It's sometimes more challenging to find God in the present. We tend to see the problems of our present situation. Oh, there are glimmers of hope here and there, people trying to find a solution, people working to end poverty and war, but those glimpses are cloudy.

Our scripture selections for this morning encourage us to do something that's even more difficult. Find God, we read, in the future. From the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, who says God is saying to us, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" And in the New Testament book of Revelation, God reveals a new heaven and a new earth, and God says, "See, I am making all things new."

These passages encourage us to look for God, not just in the past, and in the present moment, but also in the future. The future is not something to fear. God is already there. If God is truly the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, the one not constrained by time, then God is in the future.

Both of these passages, written for very different circumstances, tell us the same thing. God is in the futures business. God is preparing a path for us so that we don't have to enter the unknown.

The prophet Isaiah is speaking a word to the people who are in exile; they had been forced from their homes and homeland, deported to Babylon, the area now known as Iraq. You talk about change. Imagine how these people of Israel felt. First they'd been living in their own homes, in a land their ancestors had been given, a land they even called the Promised Land, believing God wanted them to have it. And now they're refugees, who hear, every now and then, that their beloved temple has been destroyed in their absence. How do you maintain hope in that situation? How do you keep the faith? But Isaiah says, "Oh, don't think about the past. God is about to do a new thing...to make a way..." In other words, Isaiah says, "You're going to go home. I don't know when, but this period of exile won't last forever." God is already there, in the future.

The book of Revelation is often seen as a book of gloom and doom, full of frightening images of the end of the world. Scholars tell us that Revelation was written as a letter meant to encourage those Christians who were being persecuted by the Roman Empire. It was written in a kind of secret code language, so that it wouldn't be confiscated by Rome. References to the emperor are disguised as descriptions of Satan. "Keep the faith" is the message. Times are bad, but God is with us. Better times are coming. God is making all things new. God is the one on the real throne, not the Roman Emperor.

These two books were written hundreds of years apart, but the message is very similar. "I know you think these times are the worst ever, but God is not absent. God is with you, and even more importantly, God is pulling you into the future, into a better future."

Could it be that God is still speaking, the same message, to us today? Saying to us, "I know that it's hard to keep track of all of the things that are changing. Just the time you figure out how to use one high-tech gadget it's time to replace it. Just when you

finish paying off one appliance, you find it's obsolete. We can't keep track of who our friends and enemies are around the world, allegiances seem to change quickly. The climate is changing, the planet's in trouble. But I'm here. I'm always here. And I'm also in the future. Don't be afraid of the future; I'm already there."

There's another interesting similarity in the two passages Bob read for us this morning. They both mention water. In Revelation, God says, "To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life." In Isaiah, God says, "I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.²⁰The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people..."

We find God in the water, we find God giving water, providing water, for water is the source of life. Water refreshes us, cleanses us, makes us new. Into God's water we are baptized.

How do you see people coping when they feel overwhelmed, when they feel the problems of this world are too much to bear? Here's what I see. Some people turn away, in a form of denial. It's the ostrich approach; if I bury my head in the sand, I won't have to bear witness to the pain around me. Other people turn pessimistic. They are sure that there have never been times as bad as these, our problems are so complex they have no solutions, so we might as well give up. Whether we turn away or turn pessimistic, we turn inward. We focus on our own lives, which, of course, are healthy to a point, but can become unbalanced. We numb ourselves with mindless tv or games or gossip or shopping. It's understandable; we've all done it.

But baptized Christians, who have been through the water, are called to a different response. If we are to follow Jesus, we will stay engaged in the world. We will not give up hope. We will do what we can. When I'm asked, "Why belong to a church?" "Is the

church still relevant today?” one of my responses is this. The church is a place where you can make a difference. Where you can connect to those around the world who are working for peace and justice. Where you can deliver meals, provide shelter for the homeless, teach the next generation. How else would you rather spend your time, your money, your life?

You see, if we give up on the future, what we’re really saying is that we’re giving up on God. We’re saying that God is done, finished, no more surprises, no more miracles. But if we believe that God is not just in the past, not only in the present, but also in the future, then that’s where we’ll want to be to. And you know what God is doing...peacemaking, reconciling, community-building. And looking for us to be partners in it all.

When progress has been made, it’s been because people have refused to give into pessimism and hopelessness. What if Jonas Salk had given up before discovering the polio vaccine? What if Martin Luther King had decided that the United States was never going to make any progress towards racial equality? We would have no national parks if Teddy Roosevelt hadn’t advocated for them, passionately, saving that land from development.

As Winston Churchill so famously said, “Never give up.” God hasn’t given up on us.