

Cat Goodrich
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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Change is Coming
Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

My hometown was built on oil and gas and, before that, cotton. When I was younger, I remember driving through huge cotton fields that seemed to be right in the middle of everything, to get to the land south of town where the LSU-Shreveport campus was. Row upon row upon row of cotton. Then, one day, almost overnight, the fields lay fallow and then were sold, and giant foundations of concrete and rebar were laid and by golly if they didn't put up a parking lot and a couple of big box stores, a Target and a Barnes and Noble and a Best Buy and a Sam's right there where endless rows of white tufted cotton plants had grown. These days, there are terrible traffic jams at rush hour on Youree Drive, the same road I would fly down in my dad's old black Peugeot with the windows down and the smell of earth and the sound of cicadas blowing through the car as I whipped past those fields at 16, convinced the world I knew was how it had always been, as if the ghosts of slaves and others who had worked that land didn't stand in those fields staring after my taillights as they faded in the dark.

Change can be hard to imagine before it comes.

Until it comes.

And come it does. It's unavoidable. Think of the changes Will Holmes, at 105, saw in her life before she died. 18 US Presidents. 2 world wars. Cars! Computers! The end to childhood diseases of polio and measles, only to have them make a recurrence in recent years. The defeat of the Nazis, the moon landing, the work of civil rights and the end of Jim Crowe and the rise of women's rights and LGBTQ rights alongside the rise of mass incarceration, climate change, and so much more.

These days it seems like the only constant we can count on is change.

Babies are born. Friends move. People we love grow old, or get sick, and die. Love blossoms and sometimes fades. Marriages begin and end. Buildings are built and torn down, new ones go up in their place. Cotton fields become strip malls. Monuments topple and so do regimes. Presidents

come and go. Children grow up and go off to college. Furniture moves to accommodate new needs, pews can be rearranged or even removed and despite it all, the earth still spins, the sun rises and sets and God is still God.

Change can be unsettling.

Our systems resist change. It can be exciting, but it's also uncomfortable. Our natural tendency is to push back, to resist, to revert back to what we know, to go back to what was comfortable. Change is hard, it takes some getting used to.

Every day, new images from the protests in Hong Kong show up in my newsfeed. Maybe you've seen them, too. Pictures of young people in masks, clouds of smoke and tear gas billowing in the air, reports of live ammunition and lethal force being used by the Chinese government on unarmed protesters. Change and the conflict that precedes it can be terrifying.

Our passage this morning shows Jesus seeking to prepare his disciples for impending change. It's the very last sermon Jesus offers in the temple before the last supper, before he is betrayed and arrested and killed by the state. Anticipating the tragedy of the crucifixion and the hope of resurrection, Jesus's words encourage the disciples to remain faithful in the midst of terrifying and dangerous times. Though it doesn't necessarily sound like it, his message is one of reassurance.

Dr. Joe Scrivner has been leading our Wednesday night program for the past five weeks. A Biblical scholar and Dean of the Chapel at Stillman College, Dr. Scrivner has helped us engage and wrestle with some difficult parts of scripture, namely, the strange cosmology of the Old Testament, and the prevalence of slavery in the ancient world and therefore throughout the Bible. This morning's text could have been part of the study as well, because I don't know about you, but apocalyptic language coming out of the mouth of Jesus makes me uncomfortable! What is he talking about? I don't want to be persecuted, or executed, or see the world as I know it destroyed!

What do we make of this text?

Dr. Scrivner might say that God works through the images and limited experiences of the people in Jesus' time to reveal bigger truths. Apocalyptic

eschatology was a prevailing worldview at that time. People believed that the world was going to end soon, in an epic showdown between the forces of good and evil. It's how they made sense of the difficult and oppressive times in which they lived... believing it was all part of God's bigger plan to remake the world. The words of the prophet Isaiah testify to this hope, offering a lovely vision of the world that is to come: *See I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.*

It would have been almost impossible for the disciples to believe that the temple would be destroyed. The temple was enormous. Too big to fail! By some estimates the outer court could hold some 400,000 people (Alabama's stadium can hold just shy of 102,000, in comparison). Herod, the king who put John the Baptist's head on a platter, extracted wealth from the people to cover the temple in gold and adorn it with precious stones. Even the disciples of Jesus stand in awe of it! But Jesus knows the impossible will happen. Change is coming. And not a stone will be left on stone. Can you hear him saying, *don't be preoccupied with the building!* It's temporary!

Remember the children's song, I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together? The church isn't pews, it isn't these beautiful windows, it isn't this pulpit, or even that communion table; our church is people! It's us! That's one reason why the Stewardship Team is highlighting our ministry teams, classes, and small groups as part of our campaign this year. Our relationships bind us together, and make this church *Our Church*. Don't get me wrong, I love this old building, most of the time. It's enabled incredible ministry and is worth investing in. I'm grateful for so many of you who give of your time and resources to care for it. But if it's all we see, we are missing the point. In Jesus, God was beginning a new thing, leading us out, away from the building and out to the streets, out to the margins with the beggars and the widows and the outcasts and the needy. Out to meet people where they are to share the good news and work together to build the world that is becoming.

Has anyone been following the story of Arlington Presbyterian Church?

They're in Northern Virginia, a place where housing costs have skyrocketed over the past several years and close to the new home of Amazon's second headquarters. Three weeks ago, they worshiped in their new building for the first time – on the ground floor of an affordable housing development built

on the land where their church used to stand. In conversations with their neighbors seven years ago, they heard of people's struggle to afford a place to live. And they followed Christ out of the building, selling their property to love and serve the poor in their community by partnering to build 173 new affordable apartments. The pastor, Ashley Goff, proclaimed "God's vision that justice, equity and being neighborly is incarnate" at their new church home.¹ By adapting to the changing needs of their community, they have been able to be part of a new thing God was doing there.

What new things is God calling us to? What changes do we worry might undo us? How can we stay true to our calling to love our neighbors, and to speak up, reach out, and build bridges in the midst of a changing world?

Following Christ means trusting God even and especially in the midst of circumstances that test our confidence and hope.²

In October of 1963, musician Sam Cooke and his entourage were heading to my hometown of Shreveport, Louisiana to play a show.³ They had made reservations at a Holiday Inn in North Shreveport, but when they arrived, they were turned away because they were black. Sam and his brother were furious, and protested, which meant when they arrived at their destination on Sprague Street in downtown Shreveport, the police were waiting to arrest them.

That experience, among others, inspired Cooke to write an anthem that became a rallying cry of the Civil Rights Movement. It was a song testifying to his hope: that though it's been a long time coming, change is going to come.

Something of what we are doing when we gather here each week is building hope, and shoring up our memory of God's redemptive work to sustain us

¹ Goff, Ashley, Facebook post by Arlington Presbyterian Church, 11/2/19, <https://www.facebook.com/Arlington-Presbyterian-Church>

² Lewis, Karoline, "Saying What We See," 11/6/16, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4750>

³ "A Change is Gonna Come" article on Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Change_Is_Gonna_Come. I was also informed by David Cantwell's "The Unlikely Story of 'A Change is Gonna Come,'" *The New Yorker*, 3/17/15, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-unlikely-story-of-a-change-is-gonna-come>.

when times become dark and difficult. By telling and retelling the story of God's grace and love made known to us in Christ, we build a strong foundation of faith to stand upon. Change will come, there's no doubt about that. The rhythm and ritual of hearing and claiming the good news over and over again enables us to stand together in the midst of trial and tumult, and say with confidence, we are not alone! Yes, change is coming – and we will not be afraid! God is doing a new thing! Thanks be to God!