

Change Is Hard, But God's Got This

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Change is hard. We are a changing church, not just here at Centre Street, but around the country, the church is changing. How can we manage to assimilate, adjust, understand, and ultimately grow into these changes?

Churches are changing in many and varied ways. Here at Centre Street, we are currently using shared ministry as our model. We find ourselves without a pastor to lead us. The leading is now up to all of us. I remember when Jerry Fritz was pastor here, he always said, "We are all ministers of the church." That was even printed in our bulletins. My recollection is that on the first page of the bulletin, under the name of the church it said:

Pastor: The Rev. Jerry Fritz

Ministers: All the people

It was a lovely concept, but we had a pastor, so I didn't give a lot of thought as to what that could mean. Now we are all getting a crash course in what that means, and it can feel a little overwhelming.

Frankly, I could not have imagined, even two years ago, that I would be willing or even able to give the message during a church service. Yet here I am, doing it for the second time. Many of our congregation have stepped up and out of their comfort zones to become leaders and ministers for Centre Street. Is it easy? No! Is it terrifying? Sometimes! The doubts are often much stronger than the belief that we can do this. Yet, here we are, doing it. Many of us are probably asking God, "How come you've landed us in this tough place? We have been faithful stewards to this church. Why have you allowed us to get into this difficult position?" Many of us are angry, filled with anxiety and feeling rudderless. I have had many moments of uncertainty and confusion.

The lectionary for today includes Psalm 46. Reading the Bible has not been a big part of my life. I read it when I am asked to read scripture in church, or when I have to prepare for what I'm doing today. But so often, when I do read the Bible, I find such wisdom and assurance. I really should do it more often! Part of today's lectionary was absolutely the words I needed to hear in this place and time. I will read you Psalm 46, basically assuring me—and, I hope, all of you—that we are going to be okay. God's got this!

Here is Psalm 46 from King James Bible:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;

Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. Selah.

There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High.

God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early.

The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: he uttered his voice, the earth melted. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he hath made in the earth. He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire.

Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.

The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

I had no idea what the word *selah* meant, so I looked it up, and, of course, there is no definitive answer. The word occurs seventy-one times in thirty-nine of the Psalms. Some scholars believe that *selah* is a musical direction to pause between musical phrases, some believe it means to lift up or exalt, and others believe it is an indication to stop and reflect. I like this word, *selah*, so keep that in mind as we continue.

Do you remember what it felt like to be a child? I have to think a long way back, but when I do, many of my strongest memories were from times when I was anxious or scared. I believe fear is one of our worst emotions. What was God thinking? I get the whole “fight or flight” response, but we no longer have to chase wild animals for our food. Couldn’t there be some evolutionary switch to turn off our fear response, or at least make it not feel so awful?

When I was five or six years old, I had a terrible ear infection. I fell asleep in the middle of the day in my Nana’s bedroom (she lived with us). When I woke up, I couldn’t find anyone in the house. I was terrified. Somehow small children instinctively understand that they are not equipped to keep themselves safe. I needed adults. They were not far, just in the backyard, but those two or three minutes of searching the house were horrible.

I can still remember feeling my heart beating so hard that I thought it would jump out of my chest. Who would feed me and care for me? And most of all, who would love me? I’m glad my parents heard my hysterical crying and came running in from the backyard to save me from all my imagined terrors. I would not be surprised if some of us are feeling that way about our beloved church. Who will feed us, care for us, and love us?

Anne Lamott says, “Expectations are resentments under construction.” So what do we do with our expectations for Centre Street Church? I know we all have them. For instance, I have an expectation that next year’s Blueberry Festival is going to be so amazingly successful, it will take care of all our financial worries. Not really, but I do expect it to be successful. What happens if it is not? I will probably feel resentful and concerned that I did not do enough—or that I messed up in some big way. Or I might feel resentful that the volunteers didn’t do enough, or that not enough guests came to the festival.

We are all hopeful that a pastor will miraculously land in our laps, sort of like what happened with Susie. Will we feel resentful if that does not happen? Will we feel resentful about our beloved church? How can we prevent that from happening? How can we turn our anxiety and expectations into strength and positive energy, to be the beacon of light we are meant to be?

All we really have to do is read Psalm 46. The answer is right there. The first line really sums it up: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” The psalmist is telling us that no matter what happens, no matter what life brings us, we are safe in the care of God. Our hope is in that promise, that we will always have what we need.

(That is not an easy promise to always remember—or to live. I wrote this message about two weeks before the midterm elections, knowing that I would be sharing it two weeks post election. I was feeling very anxious about what would happen during the election, but I remembered Cindy’s sermon from September, when she said that anxiety is really only the anticipation of something bad happening. I only needed to remember that God is a safe place to hide and ready to help when we need him, and I remembered these words on November 9.)

So how can we learn to remember this message when we need it? As Bonnie Beiswenger said a few weeks ago, we need to find a spiritual practice that will allow us the time and quiet we need in order to listen and, most of all, hear God.

Psalm 46 says, “Be still and know I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.” Be still, and know I am God. Remember the word *selah*. Be still, pause, and take a break! Go outside, smell a flower, stick your tongue out to catch a snowflake, listen to the waves on a beach, stand in a forest, sit in this church sanctuary, pet your cat or dog, eat an amazing meal with friends, hug a grandchild, forgive a friend. Anything that brings you a sense of awe and wonder in the creation, anything that allows you to unplug and just feel. Feel with your whole being, and don’t let your pesky thoughts get in your way. Don’t let anxiety and expectations overtake your brain, causing it to be awash in the stress hormone cortisol. Remember that God is your protector and a safe place to hide.

I have tremendous faith in this church. What that really means is that I have faith in all of you. You are this church. We are all the ministers. This is no longer a sweet sentiment in the church bulletin—it is our reality, our wondrous, exciting and sometimes scary truth. But we are not alone. I believe, with all my being, that God is with us, walking among us all, leading, prodding, encouraging, and loving us. In other words, we are being fed, cared for, and loved by each other. We need to remember to be still, and we need to remember that God is a safe place to hide and ready to help when we need him.

We've got this. Amen.