

+ Hebrews 13:8 + The Savior Remains Unchanged¹ + New Year's Eve + 31 December 2012 +

There's one word that can either fill a person with excitement or give them an unsettled stomach—change. Change can be a very good thing, a very real source of blessing, but change isn't always something we enjoy. In fact, at times it can be very difficult. Yet as another great change of the calendar looms in just a couple hours, you can't help, but think about change.

Change has happened so rapidly and in so many different ways that I think it's safe to say that the oldest generation has probably seen more change in their lifetime than almost any other generation in human history. Even for younger generations like my own, the world is very different today than it was when I was kid growing up in North Dakota in the 1980s.

Change is happening all the time, and it's not just in the world around us. You and I experience change in all kinds of ways big and small. For some the Lord provided a new addition to their family, while for others, the Lord called loved ones home to heaven. For some the Lord provided a new home or a new job, while for others, paying the bills became more difficult as companies downsized or income decreased or jobs changed. For our congregation, the Lord brought in new families and individuals, while others departed this life or left the area or the church. Over the past year, the Lord also put our congregation in position to move forward with two of the biggest projects in our history—the expansion of our facility and the new start of a daughter congregation in Watertown, while at the same time allowing us to be challenged spiritually and financially.

In many ways change is slow and subtle over days and weeks and months like a crawling baby slowly working up to standing then walking then running and playing. In other ways change comes so suddenly that it leaves you numb as it did for families in places like Staten Island and Aurora, CO and Newtown, CT. Looking ahead to the new year before us, it would be foolish to think that 2013 won't be a year filled with change. Much of that change will be small and inconsequential, while some may have a very deep impact on your life, your family, your congregation, even your country. Some changes might even fill you with fear, but this evening, as we see all the change behind us, all the change around us, and all that could change ahead of us, let's pause for a few minutes to meditate on these words written 2000 years ago: ***“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”*** As the ever-changing sands of time swirl around us, take comfort, my dear friends, because **THE SAVIOR REMAINS UNCHANGED.**

The writer to the Hebrews was giving his final encouragements to believers who were dealing with a lot of change. At one time, it was relatively safe to be a Christian, but persecution was ramping up both from Jews, who were opposed to Christ and his followers, and local Gentiles—non-Jews, Greeks, Romans—who found the teachings of Christianity to be strange and potentially dangerous to the Roman way of life. Before they had prospered, now they were losing their property, their jobs, even their freedom. Many thought about going back to the old Jewish way of life, because that seemed like a much safer, more stable option, yet the writer spends 13 chapters encouraging and explaining why Jesus is always the better option.

One of his final encouragements was to remember those who had faithfully taught them the Word of God and then ***“imitate their faith”*** (Hebrews 13:7), but those leaders were gone. Times had changed, and now a new generation had to face the ever-changing landscape around them.

How were they going to do it? How were they going to stand firm even as the world around them changed against them? The writer pointed them to the only One who has, is, and always will be unchanged. ***“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”*** When their hearts grew weak, Jesus would remain their unchanging strength. When they didn't know what to do, Jesus would remain their unchanging wisdom. When they feared for their lives and their livelihood, Jesus would stand firm for them with his unchanging compassion and love.

The world is changing around us and much of that change is opposed to Christ and his followers. No, we're not under public attack like the Hebrew Christians, but there's so much that makes our hearts weak, that leaves us without easy answers, that fills our hearts with fear of the changing unknown. You and I look back with fondness to days gone by where change didn't seem to come so rapidly, to loved ones in the Lord who faithfully taught us the Word of God, who shared their godly wisdom and who faithfully ran the race of this life despite all the challenges and changes around them, but those times have passed. They're not coming back, and those faithful loved ones in the Lord have gone to be with the Lord. Now you and I sit here looking ahead to another New Year wondering what other changes and challenges the Lord has in store, and we wonder how we're going to face them. Then those ancient words of the writer ring out once more for you and me. ***“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”*** Even as you see change all around you, look to the Savior who remains unchanged. He's the same Savior described in the Bible.

¹ Some of the thoughts and language of this sermon were received with thanks from Pr. Steve Koelpin.

By that I mean, the Savior remains unchanged in power. This Jesus, who miraculously healed the sick and cast out demons, made the blind see and the deaf hear, made the paralyzed walk and the mute tongue speak, raised the dead and calmed storms with a single command, that almighty Savior remains unchanged. Even today 2,000 years after he walked this earth, there is no crisis too big, no difficulty too small, no disease too life-threatening, no problem too challenging, no future too unknown that he cannot handle it. **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”** As we heard time and again in the weeks leading up to Christmas and throughout this Christmas season, the Savior remains unchanged in his almighty power **“for nothing is impossible with God”** (Luke 1:37).

The Savior remains unchanged also in wisdom. Yesterday we heard how Jesus amazed his teachers with his wisdom as a 12-year-old tween. Read through the Gospels and hear how the people react to his teaching, teaching that was with a divine authority unmatched by any other teacher of the law. Consider the boundless wisdom of the Savior who immediately raised the children of Jairus and the widow of Nain, but waited four days to raise his dear friend Lazarus. Recall the wisdom of the Savior who silenced his enemies with his all-knowing answers, the Savior who knew when to speak and when to be silent, what to say and when to say it, the Savior who knew after he rose from the dead, that Mary needed to see him, Thomas needed to touch him, and Peter needed to speak with him. Even today 2,000 years later, his boundless wisdom guides the major events of history, the minor everyday happenings, and the unknown events of the future, all the while being there with his wisdom when you don't know what to do or what to say. **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”**

The Savior remains unchanged in his compassionate love. Time and again in the Gospels you see Jesus look out at the crowds and literally “his stomach turns over” because they were **“harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd”** (Matthew 9:36). His compassionate love physically moved him to act, to help, to teach, to forgive, to rebuke, to encourage, to change people's lives. Recall what he did for lepers and tax collectors and prostitutes and a crucified thief. See how he reaches out to those who attack him and oppose him and prays for those who crucify him. After all, no greater example of that compassionate love is there than this—he gave his life for a world of people who hate his guts, who oppose his every command, who respond to his love with rebellion, and that includes you and me.

What's even more remarkable is that Jesus willingly endured all that. In fact, he had planned to do that from eternity, from the first promise he made to our fallen parents in the Garden of Eden. His compassionate love remained unchanged throughout the centuries even as his own people, whom he had chosen and rescued and protected, abandoned him, yet still he guided human history, still he came abandoning the glories and comforts of heaven to put himself in your shoes, into your sin-filled existence and mine.

How that amazes us! How that leaves you and me speechless as Jesus endures poverty and hardship and hunger and thirst and loneliness and weariness and suffering and punishment and death! Perhaps what amazes us most is that his compassionate love, his desire to save didn't change even as his own holy, heavenly Father relentlessly poured out on him the wrath and judgment that you and I deserve.

The Savior still remains unchanged in that compassionate love. **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”** All of that in spite of the fact that you and I have given him so many reasons to abandon that love. How often in the last twelve months have you broken promises to him? How often have words crossed your lips and thoughts crossed your mind that hurt him? How often did you take your loved ones here at church and at home for granted or mistreated them with hurtful, thoughtless, sarcastic words and actions? How often did you give Jesus no reason to love you, but yet he remained unchanged in his compassionate love for you? How often did Jesus give you reason to give thanks for his enduring mercy and his compassionate love? How often has he forgiven your sins in the past twelve months remaining unchanged in his desire to save you?

The Savior remains unchanged. He comes to you through his Word that endures forever no matter how badly the world changes. He gives you himself in his Holy Supper to forgive and strengthen you for the changes that will come in the days and months and years ahead until he brings you to be with him in the glories of heaven. Through his Word and Sacrament, he displays his unchanging power and wisdom in your life even amidst all the changes. That doesn't necessarily mean that he will reverse a change that has brought challenge or difficulty or sorrow into your life, but with his unchanging power he enables you to cope with it. No matter what the Lord has allowed to come into your life for blessing or difficulty in the past, no matter what change the Lord has in store for you in the future, **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”** Amen.