

+ Hebrews 13:8 + Celebrate Christ Our Unchanging Savior! + New Year's Eve + 31 December 2015 +

“Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day; Earth's joys grow dim its glories pass away. Change and decay in all around I see; O thou who changest not, abide with me!” (Christian Worship 588:2) On a night like tonight, you can't help, but notice that one word that either fills your heart with excitement or gives you an unsettled stomach. That word is change. Now change isn't always something we pair up with ***“decay.”*** Change can be a good thing, a real source of blessing, but change isn't always something we enjoy. In fact, at times it can be very difficult. Yet with just hours before another great change of the calendar arrives, it's good for us to talk about change.

Every year you see change. Often 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. Other times change comes on so suddenly that it leaves you feeling numb or like your head is spinning.

In 2015, we saw a tremendous amount of change—both visible and not so visible. Looking back on the past year, the world seems to be a darker, more dangerous place with violence and terrorism popping up when and where we least expect it. At the same time, the culture around us seems to be growing more secular and therefore more hostile to Christianity.

On a personal level, some of our families grew as couples were joined in marriage before the Lord or children were born and baptized. In other families, 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 challenging with job changes or decreased income.

For our congregation, all you have to do is look around to see what has changed here. Tonight we worship in a beautiful and comfortable space that was nothing more than grass piled with a lot of snow last New Year's Eve. Our former sanctuary has been transformed and serves a new, more definite purpose. With our 40th anniversary this year, you could say we've been thinking about change all year long as we've recalled how the Lord allowed us to endure great challenges and how he poured out great blessings on us.

It would be foolish to think that 2016 won't be a year filled with change. Much of that change will probably be small and inconsequential, while some changes may have a deep impact on your life, your family, your congregation, even your country. Some changes might even fill you with a certain amount of fear because of the uncertain impact they could have. Yet amidst all this change, our Lord has this encouragement tonight: **CELEBRATE CHRIST OUR UNCHANGING SAVIOR!**

What do you tell a group of Christians who are seeing their way of life turn upside down? A group of Christians who were Jewish by culture were dealing with a lot of change. It wasn't necessarily sudden, but the heat was certainly turning up. 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 non-Jews, who found the teachings of Christianity potentially dangerous to the Roman way of life. The Christians were losing their property, their jobs, even their freedom. Many thought about going back to the old Jewish way of life, but then they received the letter to the Hebrews. That letter had a simple theme—Jesus Christ is always better.

The writer encouraged his fellow believers to remember those who had faithfully taught them the Word of God and then ***“imitate their faith,”*** but those leaders were gone. A new generation had to face the ever-changing landscape around them. So how were they going to do it? How were they going to stand firm while their world changed? The writer's answer was simple. ***“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”***

The world is changing around us and not so much the better for those who follow Christ. Now 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. So you and I sit here looking ahead to another New Year wondering what other changes and challenges the Lord has in store. We wonder how we're going to face them. Then those ancient words of the writer ring out to us once more. ***“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”***

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday...” This past year we celebrated 40 years of grace. A closer look at the story of our congregation will show you that God has been pouring out grace upon grace on our congregation through good times and bad, profoundly difficult times and times of rich blessing, times of trouble and controversy and times of joy and unity—and he did it all in his own time. It's just remarkable that God did all that for us to get us here today!

About 1,000 years before Christ, King Solomon praised the Lord for that same at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. We heard it on our own Dedication Day and earlier this evening. ***“May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our fathers; may he never leave us nor forsake us.”*** (1 Kings 8:57) Looking back once more on 40 years of grace, we can clearly see that the Lord of free and faithful grace was with us and those who went before us. The believers of Solomon’s day rejoiced in God’s unchanging faithfulness to his people. The believers of the early church rejoiced in their Lord’s unchanging faithfulness even in the midst of trouble, and we rejoice as well.

We rejoice because of what Christ our Savior has done. On Sunday we were reminded how Christ is our long-promised Savior, how God guided human history to keep the promise of the Savior going from our first parents Adam and Eve through the time of Abraham and his descendants—the Israelites—up to the time when Jesus arrived. His faithful love remained unchanged even as his own people, whom he had chosen and rescued and protected, abandoned him, yet still he came abandoning his own glories and comforts to put himself into your sin-filled existence and mine. He came to rescue us! It wasn’t just his presence—his never leaving or forsaking his people—that made all the difference in the world, but his deliverance of them, of us, of countless others. The certain fact of our rescue from sin and death and the devil reminds us that our Savior was ***“the same yesterday.”***

“Jesus Christ is also the same...today...” Isn’t it amazing that Christ, who healed the sick and cast out demons, who made the blind see and the deaf hear, who made the paralyzed walk and the mute tongue speak, who raised the dead and calmed storms, that he 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 Christ our Savior cannot handle.

Isn’t it amazing that Christ, who silenced his enemies with all-knowing answers, who always knew when to speak and when to be silent, what to say and when to say it, 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, that he remains unchanged? Even today 2,000 years after he walked this earth, his boundless wisdom guides the major events of history, the minor everyday happenings, and the unknown of the future, all while being there when you don’t know what to do or what to say.

Isn’t it amazing that Christ, whose compassionate love physically moved him to act, to help, to teach, to forgive, to rebuke, to encourage, to change people’s lives, who saved lepers and tax collectors and prostitutes and a thief and even a couple Pharisees, who loved those who attacked him and prayed for those who crucified him, who willingly endured all that, that he remains unchanged? Even today 2,000 years after he walked this earth, his compassionate love for you remains unchanged in spite of your broken promises and your hurtful, thoughtless, sarcastic words and actions—and still forgives you of all your sin.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and...forever.” If we’re going to be honest with ourselves, I think we’d all admit that there is something fearful about the future. Yes, the unknown can be thrilling and exciting, but you can’t see it. You can’t 100% accurately predict it. You can’t control it. In so many ways, you can’t be certain that what you think will happen will actually happen. For good reasons know to him, God allows the future to remain dark and foggy to us.

You and I might feel about the future the same way that Jesus’ disciples felt when they met with him after his resurrection. The time was coming for Jesus to ascend into heaven and they were tasked with the work of building his Church from the ground up. Yet even as Jesus commissioned his disciples to ***“go and make disciples”***, he gave them a promise with an ironclad guarantee. ***“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.”*** (Matthew 28:18-20) That statement was more than wishful thinking. It was a promise guaranteed with his own blood, his own sacrifice, his own eternal victory.

So you look to the future and no matter how dark or murky it is, you see your unchanging Savior there by your side no matter what difficulty you face. 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 you will face until he brings you home to heaven. He knows what the future holds and has promised to not only be with you, but to guide all things for your eternal good and for the good of his Church. In the end, no matter the past, no matter the present, no matter the future, no matter what changes around you, there is One who will not. ***“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”*** So, my dear friends, in the New Year, celebrate Christ your unchanging Savior! Amen.