

Second Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 6 – Year A – June 14, 2020
The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Isaiah 49:1-7, Psalm 40:1-12, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, John 1:29-42

We are in the midst of change. Ha, you say, tell me something I don't know. And of course you would be right. I am reminded of a short story written by Washington Irving. It is the story of "...a [Dutch-American](#) villager in [colonial America](#) named Rip Van Winkle. {He} ... falls asleep in the [Catskill Mountains](#) and wakes up 20 years later, having missed the [American Revolution](#). When Rip returns to town, he finds that everything is changed: his wife is dead, his children are grown, and [George Washington](#)'s portrait hangs in place of [King George III](#)'s. The old man entertains the townspeople with tales of the old days". The townspeople listen, at least for awhile because, in their heart of hearts, they long just a bit, for the good old days. When confronted with change, human beings often experience this longing, remembering the good and conveniently glossing over that which was less than perfect.

Unless like Rip Van Winkle, you have been asleep for the past 20 years and more, you know that this nation and the world have changed in almost unbelievable ways. I need not tell you that because all of you have lived through it. You may long to tell tales of the old days, you may even wish they would return. It is this very natural and human reaction to change that is one reason why I appreciate the Hebrew scriptures. In them are the stories of centuries of change for a people as they sought to accept the ways that God came into their lives. They are the stories of tremendous movement, conflict and acceptance. There is a reason it took the children of Israel 40 years to move from slavery in Egypt to freedom at the entry into the Promised Land. With the best of intentions we do not change easily.

In the past many centuries since Jesus became human and lived in the world, Christians have sought to understand our relationship with this mysterious God whom we worship and who loves us. What we are experiencing today is one more chapter in the story that began with God creating the world. From the beginning, humans have engaged in a checkered relationship with God. That relationship has changed as our understanding has been enlarged. The God known to the earliest Christians, and to the Jews before that, is both the same God and a very different God. The same God because God is, the center of all that is. A different God because human perspective has changed and will continue to change.

At one time, we did not know that there was such a thing as an atom. When discovered we thought aha, the smallest particle there is, we know all that there is to know about this. And then of course we discovered no, there were smaller and smaller particles more and more to know. At one time we were earthbound, and now, we consider flights to the outer planets and beyond. Change in perspective as knowledge grows is an eternal and never-ending story. It is also a story that is not easy for human beings to live with.

I always smile remembering the words of Russian Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin who after returning to earth from a flight into space, assured us that there was no God "up there" in what Christians called heaven. He had been there, looked around and there was no God.

Few of us still think of heaven as “up” and hell as “down” except perhaps metaphorically. This perspective of heaven and hell is a major shift from the early church which imagined a three-layered universe. God above, earth below and Hell under the earth.

Yet as the details of the story change, the one unchangeable is God, the God that is Love and calls us to love.

There is a rather inelegant saying, not perhaps a bon mot, but rather more like the Burma Shave signs that used to be seen along the highways. “When you are green you grow, when you are ripe you rot.” Not elegant, but, in our experience, true.

Like Rip van Winkle, we sometimes long for the old days, the days when life at least seemed easier and more predictable. I’m not sure that was ever true, but looking backwards it seems so.

I tell you all of this as a way to hopefully introduce a difficult topic. The world is changing with unbelievable rapidity today. We are in the midst of it and it swirls around us, not as a gentle breeze but as a howling windstorm.

I feel like we are juggling two huge cyclones of change. We are living in the midst of a health crisis and global pandemic and we struggle to absorb the numbers we hear of death and illness. Much of the death is centered in people near to our own age. Suddenly, at a time when we had felt we had some power and control over our lives, that power and control seems to have been snatched away. Our perspective, our window through which we see the world has changed. If it has not, we are like Rip Van Winkle, trying to live in a world that no longer exists. Apparently in many places, people are returning to gathering in the same way as they did before the COVID-19 illness descended on us. They are in a way telling the story of the olden days and hoping that that story is still true.

Just when we might have been becoming resigned to the staying at home, to the masks, the social distancing and the conflicting advice about how exactly to stay safe, the world was turned upside down yet again. For many nights we have been confronted with pictures of protest and in some cases, especially early on, with violence. The morning newspaper has more pictures and articles about what was happening outside our doors. Those institutions in which many of us had put our trust and confidence seem not to merit that trust and confidence. We are learning again that little in the world is totally good. We also, I hope, realize that little in the world is totally evil. What we are being brought face to face with is what we have always known, generalizations are in the final analysis not useful. The police are not uniformly racist and the protesters are not uniformly peaceful or virtuous. The reverse is also true, individual members of the police do not serve and protect, but bully. Individual people who come to protests are not protesting but bent on destroying and looting. Generalizations are not helpful in these days.

The events of the last several days are a sign of the need for change. The call for change is a hopeful sign that we are not ripe, not finished, not perfect, but that we are green, growing, and willing to blossom in a new way. But to blossom will mean to change.

I remember the first time that a friend pruned my rose bushes. I had just moved into my first house, and the roses in the garden were overgrown due to neglect. Rod, my friend, came and pruned them when I happened not to be at home. I remember driving in to the driveway and seeing what looked like dry sticks instead of bushes. I was sure they were dead. You who are gardeners, know that the next spring I had abundant rose blossoms.

We have come again to the place in the eternal story where pruning and change is called for. We must let go of some of the things that have been so that together we can bloom abundantly. And we will--- as we have always done.

New and perhaps uncomfortable things will come to be the way of life and some things which are valuable and important will be modified to fit the world as it is now. Our perspective will change. And through it all, we can be confident that Yuri Gagarin the Russian Cosmonaut, was both right and wrong. He was right, God is not "up in heaven". But Gagarin was also wrong, there is a God, alive and well. God is here among us, among all of us. God is here, in our cities, in our streets and in our hearts and souls. God is love and that is unchanged and unchangeable. God's love is mediated to the troubled and changing world through each of us who are willing to be that love wherever we are in the world.