

A Time of Refreshing

Sermon 95 | Greystone Baptist Church | April 11, 2021

Acts 3:12-21

There's a little bakery in Austin, Texas that specializes in using lots of butter and sugar to create the best possible baked goods set on pleasing the sweet tooth. During the course of the last year, they have carved out a unique niche in the marketplace by providing cookies with funny, pandemic-related messaging etched into the icing. Quotes like, "Have we tried giving 2020 a snickers?" and "Gonna ask my mom if that offer to 'slap me into next year' is still on the table," had customers laughing their way through quarantine. While browsing their website, I found quite a few cookie messages that made me laugh a little bit, but there was one that stood out above all the rest. Its simple message reads: "I'm ready for some precedented times."¹

If you are feeling that sentiment, you can order your own box of 12 "Precedented Times Cookies" for \$60 on the bakery website: www.haleycakesandcookies.com.

It is probably safe to say, we are *all* ready for some precedented times.

Times when life felt *normal*, when rhythms of rest, work, school, worship, and play were predictable. When things fit together nicely and we could seamlessly flow from one commitment to the next without worrying about masks, social distancing and hand sanitizer.

Yes, those were the days. The precedented times.

Even though the last year has been an extreme example, the truth is that more often than not, things change and we are *continually* called to live into the unprecedented days before us rather than holding on, with our firmest grip, to the days gone by.

Just think about the first few years of life. We come into this world knowing little more than how to breathe, eat, sleep, and cry when we need something. Quickly we grow and learn how to crawl, walk, and run. Each phase causes our parents a little heartburn as it presents new dangers, but each phase also teaches us a little more about who we are, who God has created us to be. As time passes our bodies continue to teach us about growth and change. Sometimes these moments are welcome, invited, and sought after; other times they are dreaded and thrust upon us. No matter how we may feel about any particular change, time marches on.

In religious circles we have other words for *change*, words that feel a little more comforting, words that remind us God is with us all along the way. We use words like transformation, rebirth, and renewal to describe the changes that God is making within us and around us as we grow and learn. Some might even say that the whole journey of faith is characterized by change, by growth, by transformation.

¹ <https://haleycakesandcookies.com/product-category/cookies/typography-and-quotes/> retrieved April 8, 2021.

Even before we were ever part of the picture, transformation was happening. The stories of creation tell a tale of cosmic growth and change as chaos is shaped into earth. Then the work continues as land and sea, light and dark, animals and fish, plants and humans are brought to life in organic succession. Change predates us.

As the ancient stories are recorded, the first humans create a society and enter into covenantal relationship with God, a relationship in which both God and humankind grow and learn from one another. Experiences of sin and redemption, flood and drought, captivity and freedom provide the backdrop of change, growth, and continual transformation.

The birth of Jesus ushers in a new season of change as the people who awaited the Messiah adjusted to having him in their midst. Rather than meeting all of the expectations of a King, a Lord, a Savior, Jesus came as a lowly child from an insignificant town. In order to see and make sense of what he was doing, minds needed to be opened, transformation needed to occur. With the benefit of hindsight we read and tell the stories of how Jesus challenged social and spiritual norms, often choosing the side of the marginalized, the orphaned, the downcast, and the oppressed in order to teach the world about God's priorities, God's dreams, God's work in this world. And just about the time a few started to catch on, Holy Week happened, Jesus was betrayed, arrested, crucified, and buried. Change struck once again.

Inside the tomb transformation continued to happen in and through Jesus as his body was resurrected, raised, changed from death to life. And with it, the dream of God has been born again. The disciples adjust to their new reality as they begin to understand (in hindsight of course) what Jesus had been trying to say. A new mission emerges and the first churches are formed giving legs and life to the "body of Christ."

This period of change surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus was part of a period of history in which everything seemed to be in flux. Rome was becoming more of a global empire than a regional kingdom. Highway systems and common currencies began to connect the developing world through accessible travel and economic exchange. The *Great Transformation* as scholars Phyllis Tickle and Jon Sweeney would come to call it, was a time of chaos, upheaval, and reconfiguration unlike any other.² Perhaps until now.

According to Tickle and Sweeney, every 500 years of latinized history, there is a major upheaval, a season of major change, a reconfiguration of every part of life (including the church). It feels disorienting and uncomfortable, but through it all – something new is born.

Today's reading from Acts finds us squarely in the *Great Transformation*, the season of dramatic change following the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When Peter addresses the church he is speaking to a people who were confused by all that had

² Phyllis Tickle and Jon Sweeney. *The Age of the Spirit*. ebook, loc 112.

happened in Jerusalem, all that was happening now... he is speaking to a people who are longing for precedented times.

“Don’t look at me!” Peter says as the crowds gather around. They’ve just witnessed a miracle – a man was healed and folks were looking at Peter and John as if they’d done it. “This man was healed by God, through faith, just like Jesus said we could all be... and now, in your own ignorance, you have once again misunderstood.

It is our tendency, during unprecedented times, to rely on our own power and strength to survive the chaos that ensues around us. Because we know this to be true about ourselves (even now, in this extraordinarily unprecedented time), we can be sure that we would have been among the congregation gathering around Peter on that day two thousand years ago. And because we know *this* to be true, perhaps we might find a healthy reminder in Peter’s words as he turns to address the nostalgic crowd that drew near to him that ancient day in Jerusalem.

And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore [ahh, repent, another spiritual word for change]... Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord... (Acts 3:17-20a).

Peter’s original audience had borne witness to the betrayal of Jesus. They’d stood idly by as their Messiah was beaten and abused on the way to his cross and yet here they were, being offered another chance to repent and be made new.

Our historical moment is different but we certainly do have our own versions of “standing idly by” as people around us are beaten and abused, mistreated and dehumanized by our words and by our actions. Maybe we know our own versions well enough that we have grown tired of hearing about them. Maybe we have lost hope that anything will ever change. All I have to do is mention the big cultural abuses of racism, sexism, narcissism, and xenophobia... and we all start to get that old familiar feeling of discomfort deep in our guts. We don’t even want to think about it anymore.

Maybe it’s because the abuse and mistreatment isn’t coming directly from us, ...but I think the same might have been true of Peter’s audience – and he makes no distinction about who needs to repent. The “you” in the Greek is plural... so it’s more like a “y’all” to southern folks like us.

Maybe we should read it with our fullest, southern selves to really understand the meaning of this text for us today:

Friends, I know that y’all acted in ignorance, as did your rulers... Repent, therefore... y’all need to turn to God so that y’all’s sins can be wiped out... and so that the time of refreshing might come to y’all.

In fact, this plural “you” which is kin to the southern “y’all” appears throughout the earliest church as the story goes in the book of Acts. There’s a sense of communal health and wholeness that becomes a central theme as the church begins to grow and thrive in its new transformed reality.

Looking back now it is easy to see that the Spirit of God was at work in all of those threads. Healing bodies, changing hearts, transforming the church and adding to their number as more and more began to bear witness to the truth of repentance, renewal, and resurrection in their own lives. But Peter is clear that none of this is possible on our own, without first turning to God and trusting that the Holy Spirit will guide us in all kinds of new directions.

... so that a time of refreshing might come.

I don’t know about you, but after a year of this pandemic, I think I’m almost ready for a time of refreshing.

Now that the dust has settled since the old rhythms were demolished.

Last spring, I’m not sure we would have been ready. We might not have had time to let our eyes adjust and to look back and see what needed to change, what needed to go, what needed to be re-born.

But here we are getting ready or just barely beginning to re-emerge from an experience which feels like it has turned everything inside out, and it makes me wonder if we are (together) ready to be made new?

Theologian and biblical scholar Justo Gonzales says, “The Church lives in an ever-changing world. Because the mission is a bridge between the message of what has taken place in Jesus Christ and the reality in which the addressees live, missionary or apostolic study must always take into account the world in which the Church lives. That is why it is not enough to repeat what has always been said in the same way in which it has been said before. It is necessary to study both the Word and the world to which it is to be communicated.”³ He goes on to say, “We live at a time that poses urgent and complicated problems...”⁴ and we are called to respond not in fear and reluctance, but in joy and curiosity about what God might be doing through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Those church scholars, Phyllis Tickle and Jon Sweeney who have studied the past and pointed out trends and things we might learn a little from; they suggest that we are now, for the last decade or so, in a time of another major transformation. They call it *The Great Emergence* and they argue that when we emerge from this season of great change, we

³ Justo L. Gonzalez. *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*. p 52 – 53

⁴ *Ibid.*

might realize it was comparable to the *Great Transformation* of 2000 years ago. Perhaps we have more in common with Peter's audience than we realized?

Tickle and Sweeney are encouraged, though because they believe this is the Age of the Spirit, a season of change in which yes everything is called into question, but also everything is being renewed.

So what do you say?

Can we enter into this time in our lives and in the life of the church ... this time of refreshing ... and embrace it not with fear, not in search of precedented times, but with great joy for all that is yet to come?