

Sermon Fodder

Greetings, friends. Thank you for offering a worship series that will help people get foundational help for the process of change. There is a lot of "fodder" to glean as you prepare for your sermons each week. Essentially, each week we have three texts:

The biblical text: Each week has a text that will be very familiar to most church-goers, and yet, they likely have not thought of these within the framework of a conversation about our own reactions to, and ability to, change. I offer some thoughts about each one in the following pages and you will also hear Rev. Lillie Brock and I reference them in those videos. This is not in lieu of your own exegetical work, but simply a way to jumpstart your own research and creativity.

An iconic children's character: Each week, there is the possibility of weaving in the story of an animated film that has helped generations deal with the changes in life. This addition invites us to stay curious, like a child, in dealing with our own fears of change.

Our own brains: The story of our own development and processes can help us understand more deeply how and why we seem to resist change, and then either successfully make it through change or stay stuck where we are. There is a lot of information out there about neuroscience, but I've supplied you with an interview with a pastor/expert on change, Rev. Lillie Brock and her "Change Cycle," which breaks the process down in clear steps. These interviews can be used both for sermon fodder and for small group or individual study. As I said above, we also weave both the biblical text and the iconic children's character references into the discussions.

Preparing this worship series has allowed me, as preparing any series does, to discern my own spiritual journey related to changes in my life. As willing as I am to believe in the creativity and improvisation of life, I know that my brain also goes through every step of the change process–the excitement AND the discomfort. As leaders of your spiritual

community, you no doubt experience people's struggles with change, sometimes to the detriment of the joy of ministry. This series will not automatically make change comfortable. However, it can deepen our understanding, offer the community a way to be compassionate with ourselves and each other, and be a way to start good, productive conversations (perhaps instead of ad hoc parking lot gripe sessions). Most importantly, it can help ground our experience in our faith, reminding us that change is a fact of life, it will always be challenging, but we are never alone, and the miracle of the way the Creator made us is that we CAN survive change.

We live in a world that is changing at an exponentially-rapid pace. Somewhere in the middle of my life-span, I know that even in my time, there have been major changes in our world and our personal lives. When I think about the majority of our parishioners in the "third trimester" of their lives, I cannot imagine how differently the rate of changes are now than when they were at the height of training their brains for change as young people. AND I cannot fathom what it must feel like for our young people in this age of dealing with increasingly uncertain futures and problem-solving that must be done as they become the leaders of tomorrow. It can be daunting.

So whether you are in the midst of these big existential changes or going through a time of change in your community (a change in leadership, a change in mission and purpose, or maybe a change in configuration such as a merger), you can be the voice of encouragement, of teaching, of proclaiming the Good News that God created us for adaptation and change–and counts on us as co-creators of more goodness in the world, alleviating suffering, and bringing hope in the face of difficulty.

Here are some links that might "wet your whistle" as you begin to dive into your preparations:
Why our brains don't like change
Why our brains are not OK with change
Neuroplasticity
Train your brain for change
Coping with change as we get older

My prayers are with you, friends. Don't forget that YOU are not alone. Starting September 2022, we will have discussions going in the series resource area on the Worship Design Studio website where you can have conversations with others who are preaching this series. Finally, I send you into your preparations with the Mary Oliver poem on the next page. What a wonderful way to describe that change is not an easy road, but is salvific in the end, if we will but listen to the Divine Voice within.

Peace & Passion,
Marcia McFee, PhD

“The Journey” from *Dream Work* by Mary Oliver

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice –
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the world was full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voice behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world
determined to do
the only thing you could do –
determined to save
the only life that you could save.

Week 1
"We Were Made for This"

God told Jeremiah, "Up on your feet! Go to the potter's house. When you get there, I'll tell you what I have to say." So I went to the potter's house, and sure enough, the potter was there, working away at his wheel. Whenever the pot the potter was working on turned out badly, as sometimes happens when you are working with clay, the potter would simply start over and use the same clay to make another pot. Then God's Message came to me: "Can't I do just as this potter does, people of Israel?" God's Decree! "Watch this potter. In the same way that this potter works his clay, I work on you, people of Israel. — Jeremiah 18: 1-6 (The Message)

God's creative activity is described as an ongoing active force for good. Rather than fashioning us of something that could not change, the biblical metaphor is that we are fashioned of clay, a malleable substance that can be reshaped again and again. When life requires change of us, let us embrace our ability to roll with it, for we were made for this!



[click image above to see the original Gumby *trailer, "If you've got a heart then Gumby's a part of you."]*

Step One for Change: believe we are created and equipped for change

Jeremiah: The first week of a series is always partly about introducing the focus, or the lens, through which we will look at our spiritual journey throughout the following weeks. The lens of "change" is one that we all have in common. We all immediately have a gut-reaction when we begin to speak of change. And so this first week's main message is this: not only CAN we survive change, we were MADE (created, fashioned, equipped) for change. The biblical metaphor used by Jeremiah to plead for a change in the hearts, minds, and behaviors of the people of his time was clay. God is like a potter at the wheel, shaping us. We can resist or we can "go with it"–discovering more about God's possibilities for us. And even when we have "mishaps" in the midst of change–make an unfortunate choice or mess up in some way–God is continually re-shaping us again and again and again. As long as we stay malleable in the hands of the Creator, change will not break us. This is Good News indeed.

Gumby: The iconic animated character for this week is Gumby. This was a grand feat in the world of stop-motion animation for its time. Creating stories and film by moving clay pieces one tiny little step at a time is a wonderful way to describe the process of the movement of change–it cannot happen all at once. There is a process and sometimes it can feel painstakingly slow. You may glean some worthy ideas from this public television special about Gumby's creator, Art Clokey, a very spiritually-minded (if not Christian) person who cared that his character brought light and love to viewers. The Gumby figurine brought joy to many children with its flexibility (a phenomenon of its time as well). "Be Gumby" and "Semper Gumby" have become mantras for staying flexible in the face of difficulty. You might also glean some inspiration from this sermon by Rev. Dr. Jared Witt on flexibility as spiritual practice and the invitation to repentance (themes for Jeremiah and Jesus).

Our Brains: My interview with Rev. Lillie Brock helps us get an introduction to The Change Cycle, which describes our neurobiological, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual reactions in every step of change. She highlights the neurological miracles that we have been created to be and the role of neurons and the various developmental parts of our brains. We *are* Gumby'esque in our "neuroplasticity" which gives us the ability to re-shape our thinking, behavior, and orientation to the world. This is also very good news since change is, well… inevitable.
God gave us the capacity to withstand change, to enact change, to be the change we want to see in the world. We were made for this!

Go to Interview Session 1 HERE



Week 2:
“Inside Out”

John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life. John wore a camel-hair habit, tied at the waist with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild field honey. As he preached he said, “The real action comes next: The star in this drama, to whom I’m a mere stagehand, will change your life. I’m baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism—a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit—will change you from the inside out.” — Mark 1: 1-15 (The Message)

Our Scripture this week invites us to remember the baptism of Jesus and the message that we, as followers of Jesus, are changed constantly “from the inside out.” Transformation does not start with the action of change itself, but a willingness within our own spirits to “lean into” the life path that is calling to us.



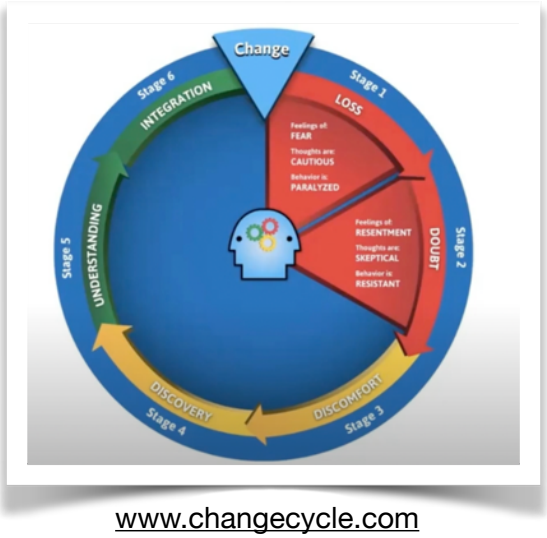
[click image above to see the trailer for the Inside Out *movie,*
“Did you ever look at someone and say, ‘What is going on inside their head?’”]

Step Two for Change: start with inner change

Mark: Eugene Peterson's interpretation of this scripture has such wonderful phrasing about "the real star" of this unfolding story. It is Jesus, and the Holy Spirit who works in and through him (and now us), that will change us "from the inside out." This is not mere cleansing with water on the outside, but an inside job. In our encounter with Jesus, we will be changed. And as we encounter the living Christ in everything around us in our lifetimes, we are invited into the kind of change that will bring about renewed spirit and vitality within us, and therefore, around us. Many of us have experienced times when we tried to undergo change in our lives without dealing with the accompanying feelings within us. It can cause some real problems. Likewise, John's baptisms were coupled with confession–another way to describe inner work, inner acknowledgement of the need for change. As the interview with Lillie Brock last week showed us, change can be forced on us by crisis, or happen to us by chance, but John's invitation was about the third impetus for change–*by choice*. Spiritual growth happens as we decide to "lean into" the kinds of change that will bring more health to ourselves, to our relationships, to our communities.

Riley: Our feature animation this week is *Inside Out*, the story of a little girl, Riley, who is going through big changes in her life. If you are doing the Children's Time scripts, this story will have been introduced then, but you could flesh it out more in the sermon. The message from this award-winning animated film that really hits home is the complexity AND necessity of our emotions around change. What we learn is that we need ALL the emotions to move through any moment of change. When we just try to be happy all the time–if that is what we expect of life–we stall the process of moving through change. Sadness is a key factor…. we must mourn what is being left behind in order to move through it. Acknowledge all the "feels." Let the tears be part of the cleansing waters of being transformed from the inside out. If you have not seen this film, do not miss this important story for children AND adults (available on Amazon Prime Video).

Our Brains: In my interview with Rev. Lillie Brock, we encounter the first steps of The Change Cycle–loss and doubt–"The Red Zone." Our brains are wired to be suspicious of difference as a safety mechanism. Is this "new thing" (the definition of change) dangerous? Is it a threat to my well-being? This is the reptilian brain that served us well as struggled to survive and develop. But it also *still* a function that can help us if we will only accept that it is a necessary part of moving forward. No, it is not pleasant, which is why we resist change in the first place. Yes, it is scary, which is why we sometimes try to skip over this part. Our theology of baptism says that we "die to the old" but we believe and have faith that we are raised from death to life. This is the good news in the midst of the difficult first reactions to change.



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Week 3
“Everything Changes”

“Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal. If any of you wants to serve me, then follow me. Then you’ll be where I am, ready to serve at a moment’s notice. The Holy One, Parent of Us All, will honor and reward anyone who serves me.” — John 12: 20-26 (The Message)

In our scripture today, Jesus asks us to let go of life “as it is” in order to create and multiply the love that is eternal. What feels like the chaos, or recklessness, of change is the breaking-open of possibility and the sprouting of new life. This is what it means to follow the change-maker Jesus and serve his purpose of more love in the world.



[click image above to see the Frozen *“Let It Go” sing-a-long video, “Let it go! Let it go! Can’t hold it back anymore!”]*

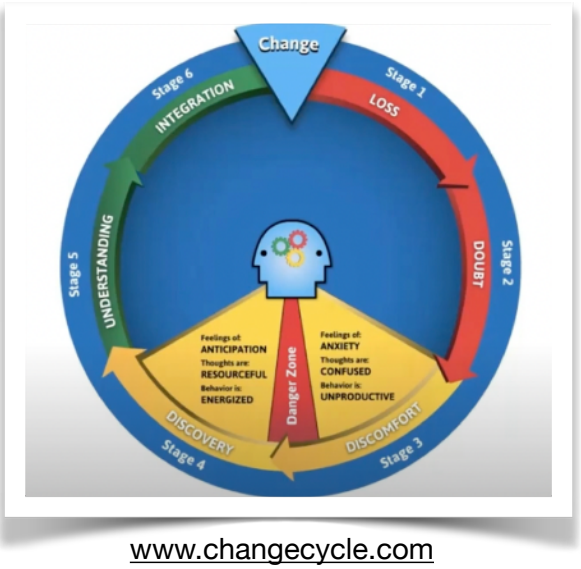
Step Three for Change: be willing to let old expectations fall away

John: You are likely not doing this series during Lent when the connection between Jesus words about "dying to the old world" would be pretty clearly connected to his impending crucifixion. In the context of this series, we can make that connection about why changing in order to follow Jesus is often particularly difficult, unpopular, full of discomfort at times, and countercultural. Jesus is asking his followers to train their eyes on what *true and lasting life* is… and is not. As part of his public farewell words, the metaphor of the seeds is about his death but also about what will sprout after his death (perhaps because of his death?) in the lives and work of disciples who will carry on the work. This week is about the power of letting go of old expectations about results so that we might make way for the change that can shift the narrative (of our lives, of our churches) into lasting vitality. Jesus is, at this moment in the narrative, ready to go with the flow of what he knows is going to happen. And he knows that in God's reality, to die is not the end of the story, but the beginning.

Elsa: Oh, my, how many kids have dressed up like Elsa? This animated character caught the imaginations and hearts of those who probably could not yet grasp what it really means to "let it go." But they will learn it because we all face the fact that "everything changes" at some point. In the narrative of *Frozen*, Elsa is hiding her true self until she just cannot do that anymore. She lets go of her fear and anxiety and leans into who she is created to be. Pretending to be who we are not, or trying to keep up appearances, or resisting change because we think we are safer "staying put" takes so very much energy that could be used for a life that grows, flourishes, blossoms. This is why I chose "Gonna Lay Down My Burdens" as the closing song for this service. We are often "at war" with ourselves and when we decide to "study war no more," we can "let go and let God," to quote a saying from recovery traditions.

Our Brains: In session 3 of my conversations with Rev. Lillie Brock, we find ourselves in the "Yellow Zone." This is a crucial part of the Change Cycle because it is a "make or break it" decision point. The danger is that we will allow our fear to send us back into the Red Zone. But as Lillie points out, if we just take a few steps back and "let it go" for a while, we are more likely to have a breakthrough, rather than a breakdown. Just like the seed in the ground, it must be allowed the dark earth, out of sight for a time and undisturbed, to hear the call of what it was created to do–break open and grow towards the light. Doing nothing, deeply listening, is often the most difficult moment of change. As disciples of Jesus, we heed some of his last words that promise that what feels like death and destruction will not destroy us in the most important ways.

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Week 4
“Be En-Couraged”

…the boat was far out to sea when the wind came up against them and they were battered by the waves. At about four o’clock in the morning, Jesus came toward them walking on the water. They were scared to death. “A ghost!” they said, crying out in terror. But Jesus was quick to comfort them. “Courage, it’s me. Don’t be afraid.” Peter, suddenly bold, said, “Master, if it’s really you, call me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come ahead.” Jumping out of the boat, Peter walked on the water to Jesus. But when he looked down at the waves churning beneath his feet, he lost his nerve and started to sink. He cried, “Master, save me!” Jesus didn’t hesitate. He reached down and grabbed his hand.
— Matthew 14: 22-31a (The Message)

It takes courage to change, to break out of whatever narrow paths we might find ourselves in. Just like Peter, if we are going to change, we have to take the first uncertain steps out of the boat onto the water and into the unknown. Luckily, we too have Jesus’ redeeming help and support, his hand reaching out to us, if we start to sink or lose our way.



[click image above to see the Elmo “Take the First Steps” song video, “See how brave your heart can be!”]

Step Four for Change: courage to take the first step

Matthew: Well, a step into change in our lives and Peter's step onto the water seem a far cry from each other. But sometimes change can feel *this* dramatic to us. We need encouragement. The disciples were scared out of their wits–not so much from the waves but from seeing Jesus walking on the water towards them… surely a ghost since they had never seen this before! But Jesus proves to them that it is, indeed, their trusted friend by saying a few things they *had* heard before. "Take heart" has shown up in chapter 9 of this Gospel, and "don't be afraid" is something he has said, and will say to them, repeatedly. It was scary times for them. John the Baptist had been beheaded and the growing crowds with their demands were sometimes overwhelming… all the makings of frayed nerves. Peter needs to be sure, however, that it is Jesus and so spouts the challenge–"if it is you, then do this." And Jesus says, "OK." I wonder if Peter, like all of us, wanted to take back his words at that point. The moment just before we step out into unknown territory is as frightening as anything we will ever do, and yet, this is what we must do at times. And Jesus is there. We won't always get it right, but Jesus is there.

Elmo: The youngsters might need a lesson on the popularity of Elmo but many parents will remember the rush to stores to get these dolls before they sold out. The Sesame Street character became a beloved sidekick for many a child (see THIS documentary). Elmo then starred in his own movies, like *Elmo in Grouchland* that features the "Take the First Step" song. Elmo's friends encourage him on what seems like an impossibly long journey. I love that this song says "see how brave your heart can be." What an amazing connection to the story of Jesus and Peter AND to the root origin of the word "en-courage" (from the French *coeur* meaning "heart"—the "seat of the emotions"). If we can have courage to take steps toward change and be encouragers of one another, this is the meaning of community.

Our Brains: The last session with Rev. Lillie Brock reminds us that, for a moment, Peter actually did walk on water. In risking change, we find out that we are capable of far more than we realized. This "Green Zone" is where we deepen understanding, our confidence is raised, we integrate our learnings, and we become more satisfied, focused, and generous. Oh, my! Wouldn't it be wonderful for our communities to feel themselves in this way?! We can. Jesus believes we can do it and with the encouragement of small, successful, processes of change, we are able to make more changes with confidence. We train ourselves as change-makers, disciples of the Change-Maker Jesus. And the world is better for it.



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