

Our Changing God

Isaiah 43:15-19 CEB ¹⁵ I am the LORD, your holy one, Israel's creator, your king! ¹⁶ The LORD says--who makes a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse, army and battalion; they will lie down together and will not rise; they will be extinguished, extinguished like a wick. ¹⁸ Don't remember the prior things; don't ponder ancient history. ¹⁹ Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it? I'm making a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness.

^{CEB} **Acts 11:1-12, 17-18** The apostles and the brothers and sisters throughout Judea heard that even the Gentiles had welcomed God's word. ² When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him. ³ They accused him, "You went into the home of the uncircumcised and ate with them!" ⁴ Step-by-step, Peter explained what had happened. ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying when I had a visionary experience. In my vision, I saw something like a large linen sheet being lowered from heaven by its four corners. It came all the way down to me. ⁶ As I stared at it, wondering what it was, I saw four-legged animals--including wild beasts--as well as reptiles and wild birds. ⁷ I heard a voice say, 'Get up, Peter! Kill and eat!'

⁸ I responded, 'Absolutely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'

⁹ The voice from heaven spoke a second time, 'Never consider unclean what God has made pure.' ¹⁰ This happened three times, then everything was pulled back into heaven. ¹¹ At that moment three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea arrived at the house where we were staying. ¹² The Spirit told me to go with them even though they were Gentiles. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered that man's house.

¹⁷ If God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who am I? Could I stand in God's way?" ¹⁸ Once the apostles and other believers heard this, they calmed down. They praised God and concluded, "So then God has enabled Gentiles to change their hearts and lives so that they might have new life."

John 13:34-35 CEB ³⁴ "I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. ³⁵ This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other."

Our Changing God

When I was a youngster, the church we attended sang a lot of gospel songs. One of my favorites was *Hold to God's Unchanging Hand*. As I recall, and it has been a while, when we got to the refrain, the basses had the melody. That was so cool! I could hardly wait for my voice to change so that I could sing the melody with the basses! And over the years, the idea that God is constant, unchanging, permanently always the same, became fixed in my mind. The theological term for this is the Immutability of God.

As the opening line of that old gospel hymn says, "Time is filled with swift transition." We all know that the world around us is changing at an ever faster pace and that can be very uncomfortable. Every time we get a new computer or a new cell phone I'm painfully aware of life's swift transitions. So it's very comforting to imagine God as being always the same, never changing. Except that's not quite the case.

You might recall how Abraham bargained with God about not destroying the city of Sodom. At first God agrees not to destroy the city if there are 50 innocent people in Sodom. Back and forth the negotiations go until God agrees not to destroy Sodom if there are only ten innocent people in Sodom.

Later in the history of the Hebrew people, when Moses comes down from receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai and finds the people worshipping a golden calf, God is ready to wipe out the Hebrews and start over, but Moses talks God out of it.

When we think about it a bit, we aren't too surprised. After all, we often pray for God to change things, and that fits in with what Abraham and Moses did in their relationships with God.

But surely God's commandments don't change. Right is right and wrong is wrong – right? In Deuteronomy 23:3, it is declared that Moabites cannot be part of the Israelites. In Ezra chapter 9, Ezra learns that the people, including even the priests, have been marrying Moabite women. He tore his clothes, pulled hair from his head and beard, and sat down in shock. And in Nehemiah 13, when the people heard the scroll of Moses read and learned that marriage with Moabites was forbidden, they banished everyone of mixed descent.

So, it's notable that Ruth is a Moabite, that when her mother-in-law, Naomi moves back to Israel, Ruth goes with her, and there she marries Boaz, an Israelite. Even more notable, she is the great-grandmother of King David and an ancestor of Jesus. Through the centuries, Ruth has been held up as an example of loyalty and faithfulness.

The 23rd chapter of Leviticus gives detailed instructions regarding various holy days and festivals that the Jews were commanded to observe. These include Passover, the Festival of unleavened Bread, the Day of Reconciliation, and the Festival of Booths. Roughly a millennium later, Isaiah reports in the first chapter that God declares, "Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them." (Isaiah 1:14 RSV) The prophet Amos goes even further, declaring that God despises the feasts and refuses the burnt offerings that are made.

So, before the time of Jesus, God had changed regarding rules about intermarriage and regarding worship.

Today's reading from the eleventh chapter of Acts is especially interesting. Peter is a devout Jew. He has tried to live by all of the rules laid down in the Ten Commandments and the Mosaic understanding of the law of God. The rules about what Jews are allowed to eat and who they are allowed to associate with have been in effect for centuries. Those rules are almost embedded in their very DNA. But Peter has a vision where he is told to eat forbidden food and he's shocked. He wouldn't dream of doing such a revolting thing! But then, some strangers show up, asking him to go meet with a Roman army officer, and to tell him how to follow Christ. Two things become startling revelations to Peter. One is that his vision wasn't meant literally. Instead, it was metaphorical. The vision wasn't about clean and unclean food, but rather, it was about not considering gentiles to be unclean people that must be avoided. The second surprising thing was that God's mind had changed on the issue. This was such a radical idea that Peter was called on the carpet in Jerusalem to explain his radical behavior.

Back to the topic of food: The eleventh chapter of Leviticus is dedicated to spelling out the rules about food. God's people are forbidden to eat any animal that doesn't have split hooves or that doesn't chew its cud, anything that lives in water that doesn't have fins and scales, and any bird that is a bird of prey. Only locusts, grasshoppers, and crickets can be eaten. All other insects are off the menu. The book of Leviticus also specifies that male babies are to be circumcised when they are eight days old.

In the early days of the church, as Paul and others took the good news of Jesus to gentiles, that is, non-Jews, the issue arose as to whether these gentile converts had to become Jews and obey the dietary laws and the law of circumcision. A council of church leaders assembled in Jerusalem to meditate and seek divine guidance. They then sent a letter to the gentile converts that read, "The Holy Spirit has led us to the decision that no burden should be placed on you other than these essentials: ²⁹ refuse food offered to idols, blood, the meat

from strangled animals, and sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid such things. Farewell.” (Act 15:28-29 CEB) God led the Jerusalem council to remove the vast majority of the laws that the Jews had been under for centuries. It’s hard to imagine a greater shift in divine law than that!

In the centuries since those days we’ve come to understand that it’s permissible to substitute grape juice for wine during communion, that God doesn’t condone slavery, that kings do not rule by divine right, that women are not second-class Christians, that no race is superior or inferior in God’s sight, and many other insights into better understanding of God’s vision for us as human beings and as Christians.

Today, we are dealing with other hard issues. We need to always ask ourselves, “Is God doing a new thing like Isaiah talked about?” Is this a time when we should put aside prior understandings that go way back in history? We also need to always keep in mind that Jesus told us to love like he loved. And when we read about his life we see just how generously he loved, how indiscriminate he was in who he loved, or as one theologian put it, how wastefully he loved.

In recent years, both the church and our government have wrestled with the subject of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Some of us are repulsed by the very thought; others are supportive of recent changes. Peter was repulsed by the very thought of eating forbidden food and we need to remember that our revulsion is not necessarily a reliable indicator of God’s will.

For those of us who feel that homosexuality can be “fixed” or “healed,” I would highly recommend the book, *Stranger at the Gate* by Mel White, published in 1995. It is the frank, open, and wrenching account of a devout Christian’s multiple attempts over a period of over two decades to change his sexuality. Also, a year or two ago, the foremost Christian program to cure people of homosexuality closed its doors because it was unsuccessful.

But beyond compassion, we need to look at scripture and seek to understand God’s will. Mark Achtemeier is a highly respected conservative scholar and professor at the Presbyterian seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. In the 90s he was prominent in getting language in the Presbyterian constitution that prohibited homosexuals from serving in ordained positions. His credentials as a Biblical scholar and conservative theologian are solid. Since the 90s he has continued to study the issue and the scriptures. Last year, his most recent book was published. The title is *The Bible’s Yes to Same Sex Marriage*. Shock waves went through Presbyterian circles. The fact that he was against acceptance of homosexuality for many years means that he did not set out to come to the conclusions that his study of scripture led him to. Any bias he had leaned in the opposite direction. And his analysis of scripture is thorough and deep, far too thorough to cover in a sermon or two.

Finally, we need to understand what the exact position that is currently taken by the Presbyterian Church (USA). Homosexual people may be ordained if they are elected or called by majority vote of the congregation. Presbyterian ministers may perform same-sex marriage ceremonies if they so choose and if it is legal in the state. Same-sex marriages may take place in church facilities if it is legal and if the session of the congregation approves. Understand clearly, because this is important, that no minister or session is compelled to be involved in such a ceremony. I would add that Presbyterian ministers are not required to perform any wedding of any sort.

Some of you will celebrate these changes. Others will be disturbed by them. All of us should carefully study to see if God is challenging us to do new things, new things like Peter was challenged to do, even though he was aghast at the thought.

What about the unchanging hand of God? Is there anything about God that isn't subject to change? The scripture repeatedly tell us that there **is** something about God that never changes – God's steadfast love. Hold onto that! Amen.

God's mind does change
We can find those changes hard to accept.
But our revulsion is not an indication of God's will.
Be open to the possibility that God is moving us to new knowledge.