

Game-Changer

Jeremiah 31: 7-14

John 1: 1-18

Anyone make any New Year's resolutions? How are you doing keeping them so far? I know that I made a resolution years ago not to have any further New Year's resolutions. The resolution against resolutions has worked quite well; it is the only one I haven't broken.

If you're looking for a game-changer in your life, the tick of a clock and the flip of a calendar page is highly unlikely to be an effective methodology. That's because change is hard, and the older I get the harder it is. Breaking out of familiar patterns, particularly ones that we really like, takes concerted planning and effort. If it was easy to do, we would have done it. That we haven't done it - whatever *it* is - means that we're in for a fight ... with ourselves.

It is nice when you have a choice, and typically that's what a New Year's resolution is - a **choice** to do something differently. It's also a **choice** *not* to change, the more common option.

But if you look closely at the bulletin cover image, you'll see that the roadway leads nowhere; it's a dead end with posts showing the terminal point. When you have taken the old familiar road as far as it will go, what are you going to do? When the normal and customary and traditional don't give you traction any longer, then change isn't an option. It's time to change the game and head in a different direction.

We celebrate game-changers in our society. Steve Jobs and Elon Musk have been seen as rock-stars for innovating in game-changing ways. Not everyone gets the celebrity that they deserve.

We're all familiar with suitcases for travel. For centuries, the suitcase was a boxy hard shell that closed with locking clasps. Moderns made it smaller and put a handle on it for easy carrying. Other smaller travel bags were used to carry items over distance, like backpacks and rucksacks. Zippers started appearing in 1938. The first nylon backpack was sold in 1967. For all that time, people had been lugging around their cases as they chugged out to taxis and rental cars, slogged around bus depots, train stations, and airports as their muscles ached under the weight. It seems rather amazing that the first rolling suitcase wasn't invented until 1970 when Bernard Sadow was toting his luggage through an airport and saw a worker rolling a heavy machine on a wheeled skid. Ha! Put wheels on luggage! Game-changer. It takes what was the old familiar and takes it in a new direction.

What we hear from our scriptures is that our God is ready to bring on the game-changer. Whatever came before, and whatever the expectation is, God is ready to switch it up and make new things happen that were wholly unexpected and truly become game-changers. We may find it difficult to imagine major changes in our lives, but God's imagination is not so limited.

When we hear the words of the prophet Jeremiah, like in today's reading, we ought to expect that God's people of the time thought he was looney-tunes-crazy. Prophets are like that, announcing things that seem off-the-wall improbable. The reason he sounds so loopy with all of this happy-talk is the context.

Jeremiah's prophecy occurs before, during, and after the conquest by Babylon and the exiling of God's people. They have been carted off to Babylon to work for the emperor and his empire. Those who remained in Judah among the ruins of the cities and towns, including Jerusalem, got to work for the Babylonian emperor and his empire, too, except within a ransacked, ravaged, devastated mess of country.

Amid these desperately dark, depressing, and disheartening conditions, Jeremiah launches into oracles of *promise*. Knowing what God's people were facing day-in and day-out, his words must have seemed ridiculous. In the chapter before – chapter 30 – Jeremiah recounts the Lord saying how actions had been taken against God's people for their sinfulness, and how they could do nothing for themselves any longer, saying: *Your wound is incurable, your injury beyond healing*. It's like a terminal diagnosis: 'you, people of God, are on life support, and it won't take much or take long before your existence in the world comes to an end.'

Having been through years of threat, siege, conquest, and occupation, and then looking ahead into the future, few among God's people would argue that they were indeed on the edge of extinction as a people.

Then comes the new promise of God, that Judah and Zion would have their fortunes restored, the city and nation rebuilt, and their legacy renewed as those who have come to stand against God and God's people are turned back from thwarting God's will.

Jeremiah's prophecy describes how God will bring them all together, from the different tribal families, from southern kingdom Judah and from northern kingdom Israel to the expatriates who have gone afar, whether to Babylon or Egypt or Phoenicia, or somewhere around the Mediterranean. God is also bringing along the weakest as an explicit priority – the lame and the blind, women pregnant and even in labor in a no-one-left-behind strategy. Jeremiah's prophecy affirms that all have a place, a home, in the new covenant promise of God with his people. It is a plan for inclusion, a wide embrace.

God's role as shepherd of his flock, his people, gets further affirmed, protecting them and keeping them safe from forces much stronger than this small nation. God will provide for their well-being, and they shall know abundance, blessing, and peace.

It all sounds awesomely wonderful, **and completely unbelievable** if you're a citizen of Jerusalem. You would have survived the sacking, pillaging, burning, and destruction of the city and live amid the ruins, experience daily privations, and see the Babylonian military patrolling the streets as the occupying army. Is Jeremiah nuts? This

vision is lovely but that much game-change, redeeming this catastrophe, is to speak utter madness. And there it is: God's people have a genuine disbelief that God can do something so ridiculously outrageous that would bring about a new covenant promise with God's people.

Such disbelief sounds a lot like us who have rationally-based doubts about what can be done with our lives and lifestyles. We see what seems a monumental amount of change, and we surrender. It cannot be done. We even doubt that God can do it.

What Jeremiah is reminding us is that when God does something new, be ready for an amazing ride. If anything, God will put more change on our plates than we are willing to handle. Again, more than we are *willing* to handle.

The picture of the extent of change that God brings is massively apparent in the opening to the gospel of John. The fourth gospel has unique elements that make it quite different from the other three gospels, but it also shows that it is a later or newer edition. An example is presented in the very abstract and theologically reflective recasting of the creation story. Remember, having just gone through the beginning of Matthew and Luke in their nativity stories with Advent and Christmas, to encounter no nativity story, but a theological statement recalling the Genesis creation story is exceptional among the gospels and indicates the scope of what God is seeking to do.

For John, God's action in Jesus is such a game-changer that it validates **re-writing** the story of creation. In fact, Jesus is at the center of this version of creation, the primary factor defining God's activity and God's plan.

John is also clear-eyed about what will happen when this game-changing presence comes into the world. "The world will not recognize him." "His own did not receive him."

Yet Jesus is the very light of the world, and those who believe in him have the promise of new life through him. Through Jesus, believers become children of God themselves.

What we find in both texts is the power of God to make incredible things happen, things that are amazing, but normally we aren't willing to work to handle such changes. Their power and breadth are overwhelming, beyond the typical level of change we're willing to cope with. It's too disruptive for us, too confusing, too much altogether.

Hopefully we can adapt better as faithful witnesses. I don't know exactly what God has in store for you as an individual, although I can assure you that it would blow you away. Faith communities are little more than reflections of those within. Can we have expectations of greater or even different things as God's promise urges us to think new thoughts, imagine new things, and become new beings of faith and spirit.

What plagues us is an unwillingness to make change. We're great at talking about it, but lousy about actually doing anything. Or we like to imagine we've changed

something when we haven't, and then we're disappointed by a lousy outcome ... well, only if we really believed whatever we did was something different – it likely was the same old thing just dressed up a bit differently.

This year, we need to get a grip on how we want to shine the light of the Kingdom to the world, how we want to serve the Lord in a new era, and how we will invite others to join in our faithful efforts. Let our confidence be in two ways. One, knowing our reluctance to really embrace meaningful changes, may we subject ourselves to rigorous self-examination. And second, may we always remember that the promise of God is bigger than anything we can imagine on our own. We can experience game-changing if we have the faith to embrace it.