

“Rolling With Change” –Mike Eggleston at St Benedict’s Episcopal Church with
Amos 5.18-24, Wisdom of Solomon 6.12-16, I Thessalonians 4.13-18, Matthew 25.1-13

I chose to write this sermon last Monday, the day before election day. I did that because it was possible that I might have no coherent words to say after the election. Like Job’s friends, it was possible that we could all be sitting seven days in the dust grieving in silence. The other reason I wrote before election day is because this sermon is about change, dealing with change. And one of the realities of big changes is that we don’t know in advance what they will be. On Monday before the election, I thought there were three most likely outcomes. One, the nation turns toward a moderately progressive agenda. Or two, the nation continues its status quo, though this is maybe the only time you’ll ever hear status quo spoken in relation to President Trump. The third possible outcome that I thought was most likely was 11 weeks of confusion and conflict between election day and inauguration day, during which time parties on opposing sides try to control the change.

In any case, changes are happening by the time we’re worshipping now. One is glad for major changes when we can all pitch in and help in the aftermath. I’ve lived in communities which have experienced sudden floods and earthquakes. How good it was to work together after those. I’ve never lived in communities where people bash and thrash one another after a great change. So we pray for communities working together and not against each other now. Yet in the long history of the Jewish and Christian people, we have known many times of weathering great change. In today’s scriptures, we see four different ways in which the people and prophets of God have taught us to face change and roll with change.

Go first to about the year 750 BCE, before the Common Era. The first of sixteen prophets whose names became the names of Biblical books left his herds and his sycamore trees behind in the little country of Judah. Amos came to the king’s court and the courts of worship in the neighboring kingdom of Israel. His words would set the pace for six more prophets before the Babylonian exile, namely Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, and the earlier words of Ezekiel. What Amos said was not popular at the time. People, even preachers today think that Amos spoke mostly about justice, which he did. But justice was not Amos’ main subject. God will make an end of you because you have abandoned justice was his main point. Many people thought then that their God would fight for them and defeat their evil enemies and bless them as worshippers of the true God. That was evidently called the Day of the Lord, the day when God would eradicate one’s enemies and vindicate us. Amos was the first prophet to spin that theology around and turn it back on the heads of its own followers. Why do you desire the day of the Lord, asked Amos. It’s a day of darkness, not light. It’s like when you run from a lion smack into the arms of a bear, and if you somehow escape both and dash in and bar the door of your house, well, there a poisonous snake bites you. So stop desiring the day of God’s victory for you and defeat of your enemies. For God will make an end of the kingdom of Israel and its people because you have abandoned justice, said Amos. You’ve trampled the poor into the dust, you’ve pushed the afflicted out of your way, you’ve made yourselves rich by seizing the goods of the poor. It’s over, you’re done, Amos said to the 10 northern tribes of Israel. 30 years later the doom that he pronounced did come, the 10 northern tribes were extinguished by invading armies. But Amos is famous for also speaking of one way out. There had been one way to roll with change that could have worked. “Establish justice in the gates. It may be that God of hosts will yet

be gracious to the remnant of Israel. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream. That's Amos. The change that's coming is terrible, unless, the very thing that by its absence dooms you is what can save if you practice it. Roll out justice like an everflowing stream.

Now move ahead 750 years to about the year 1 BCE or CE, Common Era. The book we call Wisdom or the Wisdom of Solomon was probably written in the great Egyptian/Greek/then Roman city of Alexandria, crossroads of Eurasia and Africa, also home to the greatest population of Jewish people in the world at that time. Alexandria saw its share of changes. Thirty years earlier, it had been the capital city of Egypt under Cleopatra but had fallen to Rome. About the same time our text was written, a refugee family from Bethlehem probably landed in Alexandria while they fled the massacre of the innocents as told by Matthew. In seventy years, more refugees from destroyed Jerusalem would flow into Alexandria. An everchanging city, Alexandria. Within our book of Wisdom, something was happening there unlike anything else in our Bibles. Jewish and Greek cultures were blending, Judaism and Hellenistic philosophies come together in the Book of Wisdom. But I'd better get to our text today in chapter 6. Amos cries out for justice. The Wisdom of Solomon cherishes wisdom. In Proverbs wisdom went by her Hebrew name Hochma. She was the creative, joyful side of God. In Wisdom she is called by her Greek name, Sophia, and she is beautiful. In today's passage Sophia is introduced as radiant, unfading, gracious. In the next chapter, wow, in two verses alone Sophia is praised for 22 qualities. She is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle, mobile, clear, unpolluted, distinct, invulnerable, loving the good, keen, irresistible, beneficent, humane, steadfast, sure, free from anxiety, all powerful, all seeing, and penetrating in all spirits that are intelligent and pure. If that sounds like going over the top with too much praise, well, consider that what meant by wisdom then included what we would today call science and engineering, and history and art and communications and just about every form of learning that can be learned. Nelson Mandela said that "education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world." In times of great change, even the greatest libraries might be burned as happened in Alexandria. But the love of learning is innate to humans. Wisdom is vital for any lasting civilization.

Now go forward 50 more years or so, to the northern shore of the Mediterranean to the city of Thessalonica. The earliest book of our New Testament is probably the one written by Paul to a few dozen fledgling Christians there. In the year or two since becoming Christians, they'd already come through great and terrible changes. What was great included becoming some of the very first Christians in Europe. They were in on the ground floor of this new movement that taught unity between Jews and Greeks and slaves and free, and taught love as the heart of God and the way to live, and taught resurrection and eternal life as our destiny through Jesus Christ. What was hard in Thessalonica was that their founders Paul and Silas and some of the very first believers had been attacked by an angry mob a few weeks after they first began. They survived that, though Paul and Silas were hustled out of town. But now the Thessalonian Christians had a more ancient change to face, namely death. By the time Paul writes First Thessalonians, scholars think some of their members had died. Their new Christian faith said that Christ conquers death, and furthermore will come again and raise the dead. But how do you square his victory over death with the fact that beloved members, sisters or brothers or parents or children, have died and been buried, but there's

no resurrection yet? The Thessalonians were young Christians; they wanted to know so they must have messaged their concerns to Paul. What happens with our loved ones who have died?

Paul wrote back with something else that helps us in the face of great change. Paul wrote back faith. We believe, that's the same word in New Testament Greek as faith, we faith that Christ died and is risen. Even so, Jesus when he returns will bring with him your loved ones who have died. I declare to you that when Christ comes again the dead in Christ will rise first and we who are yet alive will meet them and Christ in the air and then we will be with the Lord forever. Some Christians call this the rapture. Paul doesn't use that word. He just answers this great change called death by saying we believe in Christ who died and is risen. So, the dead in Christ will rise. Christ will bring them with him.

We have one more passage about how to roll with great change. The speaker in this case is Jesus himself. Here Jesus told a wedding story that was both very normal for first century Galilee and also very unusual. The normal was that on the first night of a wedding feast the groom came with his attendants to the home of his bride's parents to fetch her to his home, and the bridesmaids and the groomsmen lit the way with torches or lamps, and a wedding party began that might go on for a week. That was normal. What's unusual is pretty much everything else in this story.

Just to reel off a few weird things here, where is the bride in this parable? She's never mentioned. It's not strange that the groom might show up late at night at a surprising time, that was apparently part of the fun. But it is very odd that ten young bridesmaids, the Greek word here is virgins, should go out at night to meet the groom and then apparently fall asleep all ten out in the fields. They're not girl scouts with sleeping bags, they're bridesmaids dressed in their finest. It's also very odd that when five of them don't bring enough oil for their torches that the other five can't or won't help them. Then it's odd that they they're told to go to those selling oil after midnight and buy more oil. Right. How many all night oil dispensaries were open at 2 AM in Galilee? When the five bridesmaids finally arrive for the party how strange is it for the groom to say, shoo, bridesmaids, I don't know you. Goodbye. I've conducted over a hundred weddings over the years. I've never locked out one bridesmaid. This whole story reminds me a little of Alice in Wonderland, curiouser and curiouser. And maybe that's part of the point.

Change happens. Strange change happens. We who follow Christ had better be as prepared as we can to meet him. Perhaps we only meet him at our death or at his second coming or on the day of the Lord. But that's not what he himself said about meeting him. He said that there I am in the midst of you. He said in this very same 25th chapter of Matthew that I was a stranger and you took me in, I was hungry and you fed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you visited me. Whatever you did or did not do for one of the least of these, you did or did not do it for me. Are you surprised? What is the oil that five bridesmaids have and five bridesmaids sadly are lacking? I suggest that oil is the ability to see Christ in other people. It's a strange changing world. So do justice, love wisdom, believe God's love. And see Jesus Christ in others. So help us, God, Amen.