

Anybody here love change? Do you get excited when you get to the grocery store in a hurry to pick up your favorite cereal only to find that it's been discontinued? Are you energized when you discover that the New York State Department of Transportation is rerouting a roadway between home and work? Do you jump up and down with joy when you are notified that your favorite sports team is changing its name? Raise your hand if you love change. Hmmm. Thought so! Change is not something most of us enjoy, and for some of us, it is very difficult.

People are particularly peeved when things change at church, I think, because church is a place where we uphold tradition, where we expect to feel comfortable, where we come to find refuge from the other things that are changing in our lives. It's bad enough when things are changing at home or at work or in the grocery store, but when things change at church, where can we go to find comfort or refuge?

Just now, we're contemplating a major change in our worship life, a change requested by the congregation at our annual meeting. In hopes of reducing our paper usage, we're investigating how we might display the order of worship on digital screens. I've heard a variety of different reactions to this proposal. Here's a list. "I like having a bulletin to hold." "I don't like the feel of a bulletin; it makes too much noise. I'm looking forward to using the screen." "I'm worried that I won't be able to see the words on the screen." "That digital screen idea makes me feel like I'm in a sports bar, not in a church." "Finally, we're coming into the 21st century!" "Can't we go back to using the green hymnal?" The team that is investigating this proposal is exploring lots of possibilities to discover how, as we reduce paper, we might best support worshippers, both long-term members and newcomers, with resources to follow the service so that each of us can participate without barriers. If you have input, you can speak with Pat Corkedale or come to the next meeting, Saturday May 4 at 3:00 p.m.

In today's gospel lesson, we hear Jesus addressing the complex dynamic of change. When he arrives at the temple in Jerusalem just before Passover, he is met by Philip and Andrew and some Greeks who wish to see him. Up until now in John's gospel, Jesus has paid attention only to Jews, except for one conversation: with the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4. Because she is a Samaritan, whose ancestors worship on a mountain, she is not considered to be authentically Jewish by Jesus' fellow Jews, who worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Maybe this conversation with Philip and Andrew and the Greeks is a foreshadowing of the change that will happen after Jesus' death: the disciples will be sent out from Jerusalem beyond their Jewish community to witness to Jesus in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Change is afoot in this story. Jesus' original followers are all Jews, but in today's lesson some Greeks—in other words, some Gentiles—begin following him.

Almost immediately Jesus borrows a metaphor to talk about change. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." This metaphor of a seed makes sense, right? "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." A seed that sits on your kitchen windowsill doesn't do anything. A seed that falls into the earth—or that you plant in a pot—begins to grow into a seedling,

as long as it has proper moisture and oxygen. But that change from seed to seedling happens only when the seed itself dies, when it releases its identity as a seed. In other words, once it's a seedling, it is no longer a seed. While it has all the nutrients it needs to begin a new life, until it dies as a seed, it cannot bear fruit. It cannot germinate, it cannot produce leaves to feed itself through photosynthesis, it cannot grow, it cannot bear fruit.

Isn't this how a lot of life works? New life comes from some sort of loss. An ovum and a sperm cease their individual life to create new life together. One day you suddenly notice that you have a toddler—and confront the terrible reality: your baby is gone! A high school student leaves home and family to begin preparing for adult life. Two people lose their single identity when they get married. A young couple loses their freedom when their baby is born. You let go of an apartment—and the convenience of having a landlord to fix things—to move into a house. You take a new job, which requires a move. Only when we let go of one stage in life can we proceed to another. Only when a seed dies can it grow.

In Christian tradition and practice, we hear these words of Jesus in different contexts. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Of course, the primary event of dying and rising is Jesus' own death and resurrection. Just like a seed, unless Jesus dies, he can't be raised. Dying, he gives us new life. But there are many other examples of life arising from death.

Kathleen Kristin Ruen can tell you about death and new life at Koinonia. In 2018 the newly renovated Trail Building burned to the ground, and a few months later a serious mold problem shut the camp down. Some were convinced that it wouldn't open again. The pandemic, however, provided time to remediate the mold, repair and repaint buildings, install HVAC systems to prevent future mold, and rebuild the Board for a new future. Kathleen speaks of Koinonia as a “symbol of the transformational power of God,” because she saw new life coming forth after apparent death.

The “transformational power of God” is active in our congregational life as well. Out of death has come new life, over and over again. Until 98 people left Christ Lutheran in 1962, where they had been baptized and confirmed and married, there were no charter members of King of Kings. Those 98 followers of Jesus lost their identity as members of Christ to take on a new identity—as members of King of Kings. They ceased involvement at Christ in order to become engaged in worship and education and service here. Since then, King of Kings has been changing, dying to one thing and rising to another, for 64 years.

Who knows what King of Kings lost in 1968? Its worship space in the Ambulance Corps building. What did it get instead? This space, where we still worship today, which itself has gone through two renovations, two big changes, two dyings and risings.

Over 64 years, we've chalked up a whole list of dead things. Expectations like: Council members are male. New members are of European heritage. Norms like: Couples are legally married, with one woman and one man, and they populate the congregation with children. (Are any of you couples here volunteering for that task?) The shape of Christian Education has also changed markedly. Sunday School

is gone; what is it now? BING. VBS used to be two weeks, from 9-noon Monday-Friday. What is it now? One week, 10:30-noon, Monday-Friday. 50 years ago there were 15 or 20 students in each confirmation class—now we have only a few. Yet more deaths: Ruth Circle, Rebecca Circle, Hope Circle, Women of the ELCA. And my least favorite: “Pairs and Spares,” a fellowship group for couples and—you guessed it!—singles. We’ve also died to some practices such as “No one is allowed to clap in worship.” OR “The only approved instruments for use in worship are organ and piano.”

Sometimes a change has happened without our choice. An adult day care left for another location. The Learning Garden pre-school program closed when it couldn’t compete with Universal Pre-K. COVID prevented our gathering for several months. Who remembers what year was that? 2020.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” As we’ve let go of dead things at King of Kings, God has created new things; out of death has come life. Losing the image of pastor as “man”—and losing two families who didn’t believe in woman pastors in 2009, you got me! Losing a rigid concept of what instruments are allowed in worship, we have enjoyed the accompaniment of guitars, saxophones, clarinets, flutes, strings, and rhythm instruments, and we have expanded our hymn repertoire to include hymns from all over the world.

As we have learned about new models or experimented with best practices, we have redesigned our educational programming. We lost Sunday School, but now we have BING. Anyone remember what BING stands for? Take the “B” from Bible, the “IN” from INtergenerational, and the “G” from Gathering, and you get “BING,” Bible Intergenerational Gathering. Alongside only one week of VBS for lower elementary-aged children, we now have one week of ABC—what does that stand for? Arts Bible Camp—targeted at middle school children.

There have been changes in our small groups as well. We lost WELCA and the women’s circles and Pairs and Spares, but we added Yoga and Book Club, and our “Young at Hearts” monthly luncheon for seniors has expanded—and now about a third of the guests are Jewish. While COVID shut us down in 2020, it also prompted us to add ZOOM and livestream options for our worship services and educational activities. As we lost, we gained. As something died, God brought something new, over and over again!

What if King of Kings had refused to change after it moved into this building? There would be no Fellowship Hall or Library, and the chancel would have no windows, a unique feature of our sanctuary. What if we still had only the original “red” hymnal, filled with “Thee’s” and “Thou’s,” with no “Borning Cry” or “Pass It On” or “Lord, Prepare Me”? What if Christ Lutheran, formed out of a Lutheran congregation that was founded in 1709, had continued worshipping in German? Would you understand the liturgy—or the sermon? If nothing had changed, only white people would be worshipping here, and only men would be serving on the Council—or reading the lessons—or preaching.

“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Over the years, much has died in our life together at King of Kings, and much new life has sprung out of those deaths. What’s the next change? Can we let go and move into the future God has prepared for us, or will we hold on to old expectations or old norms or old ways of being church? To what is God inviting us to die to make way for God’s new creation among us? AMEN