

AC-CENT-TCHU-ATE THE POSITIVE; ELIMINATE THE NEGATIVE

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One of the greatest coping mechanisms we use to handle our lives is to assume, at least at the “big picture” level, that today will be pretty much like yesterday.

Like yesterday, today red will still mean stop and green will mean go,

Like other years, this year Dunedin will NOT have a white Christmas,

Like at the end of the 20th century, at the beginning of the 21st century

we’ll read Advent lessons that talk about the second coming of Jesus,

but except for some wackadoodles televangelists,

we don’t really believe it will really happen, at least not now.

Humans don’t much like change (unless it’s our idea, of course)

but all humans around this world absolutely need hope, especially the hope

that there is a transcendent force for good behind our existence,

and this good force will some how, some day, change things for the better.

The prophecy from Isaiah we read today is about 2,700 years old.

This lesson is being read in churches around the world this Sunday.

Hundreds of millions of people¹ on earth right now hear and yearn for Isaiah’s promises to be true.

Some day.

Jesus knew that humans both resist change and desperately want it.

When he talks about the people at the time of Noah, he is pointing out that they had no idea disaster loomed ahead, that everyone and most creatures would be utterly swept away.

Only 8 people and the animals on the ark (plus, I assume, all the fish) would remain.

That’s a pretty grim context for what we call the good news of Christ,

but who here hasn’t seen how life can change in an instant?

After being swept away, when everything we’ve known has changed,

the gap between our yesterdays and our tomorrows can seem like an abyss.

What should those who follow Christ do to deal with change?

The first thing we need to do is remember two things:

God didn’t wait for us to have everything figured out before coming to be with us the first time, so there’s no reason to assume we’d have to have it all figured out before God comes again.

The change that flummoxes us doesn’t unnerve God.

God can handle rough and tumble of life on earth.

Jesus didn’t live in a bubble; he came right into the reality of human life

as a force for good, making life around him look a bit more like Isaiah’s vision;

he healed the sick, confronted the hypocrites, welcomed the outcasts;

respected the dignity of women and children; cleansed the temple;

and quite literally bore the brunt of our murderous sin-filled wrath

without succumbing to violence to save himself.

The other thing that we need to remember is that having faith

is neither a spectator sport or a final exam testing our doctrinal purity.

Having faith means putting what we believe into practice now.

If we believe that God is indeed an awesome transcendent force for good,

we will join God in the rough and tumble of life on earth in the midst of the changes and chances of life.

¹ SWAG: That there are approximately 2.5 billion Christians, and that the global average for Sunday church attendance is 25% of Christians.

We will use the gifts with which God has already equipped us
to be a major way that God's force for good gets good things done here.
The rub is that if we want to live our faith, put it into practice,
have the world be like we yearn for it to be, change is necessary.

One of my favorite sayings is that every system is perfectly suited
to obtain the results its already getting.

The systems the world has in place now – what results are they getting?
Indeed, there are some people who perpetuate the systems of inequity, war,
and other actions that belong to the darkness
because indulging their selfish desires is their goal in life.

They want systems that let them get whatever they think they want it,
regardless of the consequences.

Isaiah's prophecy is grounded in positive change, transforming human hearts, global economics,
and national criminal justice structures with the weapons of light.

Remember, nothing in Jesus' teaching tells his followers to use the tactics
of oppression, violence, shame, cruelty, disrespect, or rudeness
to bring the unity and peace God intends for all nations.

The key to POSITIVE transformation is to change things the way Jesus changed things
in the midst of the rough and tumble of life.

There's a catchy old song with a terrific message to start this new year.

The song came out in 1944; remember what the world was like then?

There was a world war going on. Talk about rough and tumble!

This song encouraged Americans – all Americans –
to use a particular attitude to handle the chaos and darkness.

The song is still being recorded by artists today . . . including Sir Paul McCartney.

What was the advice? You got to ac-cent-tchu-ate the positive:²

Partial lyrics:

You got to ac-cent-tchu-ate the positive
E-lim-i-nate the negative
Latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mister Inbetween

You got to spread joy up to the maximum
Bring gloom down to the minimum
Have faith, or pandemonium
Liable to walk upon the scene

To illustrate my last remark
Jonah in the whale, Noah in the ark,
What did they do, just when everything seemed so dark?
"Man," they said, "we gotta . . .

Ac-cent-tchu-ate the positive
E-lim-i-nate the negative
Latch on to the affirmative
Don't mess with Mister Inbetween

² "Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive" was published in 1944. The music was written by Harold Arlen and the lyrics are by Johnny Mercer.

How should do we do that here in this corner of God's world?

Happily, our yesterdays are a solid and joyful base for our tomorrows.

Kids are hungry? Seniors are lonely? Families struggle?

Homeless folks are cold?

Let's feed, clothe, shelter, and give them a hand up.

Our Community needs a safe, lovely, accessible place to gather,
strengthening minds, bodies, souls, and spirits?

Let's throw our campus doors open to all.

The world seems full of bad news? We come to the House of the Lord
to learn to walk in God's paths, rejoice in God's goodness,
to praise God with beautiful bells, joyful voices, prayers for peace,
and to be fed with the very presence of our living Lord.

People can't get to worship?

Let's share God's presence by visiting with them,
because our church is ever so much more than our building.

You get the idea – we have this whole mission and ministry book
full of ways people have been gifted by our God
to make Isaiah's promise more real for so many.

Yes, our yesterdays are a beautiful foundation for our tomorrows,
but we also know that the Holy Spirit is always calling and leading us
to discern wonderful new ways to dress ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.

I know that because every new person who walks in these doors
is a guest of the Holy Spirit, someone gifted by God for a particular ministry.³

As they come to share their gifts, we add new missions and ministries.

Jesus tells us to be prepared for the future, and the great news I have for you
is that because our yesterdays have already focused on God's promised future,
we are ready to take on positive change and be a force for good, for God,
and not fear the Day of the Lord, however and whenever it comes.

In fact, when our focus is to ac-cent-tchu-ate the positive, eliminate the negative,
and latch on to the affirmative, we'll have the kind of positive, joyful faith,
to have the confidence to actually be eager to say: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

³ Br. Geoffrey Tristram, SSJE, Gift - Brother, Give Us A Word, email meditation for 1/27/12.

ISAIAH 2:1–5

This is what Isaiah, Amoz's son, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house will be the highest of the mountains. It will be lifted above the hills; peoples will stream to it.

Many nations will go and say, "Come, let's go up to the Lord's mountain, to the house of Jacob's God so that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in God's paths."

Instruction will come from Zion; the Lord's word from Jerusalem.

God will judge between the nations, and settle disputes of mighty nations. Then they will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools. Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will no longer learn how to make war.

Come, house of Jacob, let's walk by the Lord's light.

PSALM 122

L I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."

C **Now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.**

L Jerusalem is built as a city that is at unity with itself;

C **To which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, the assembly of Israel, to praise the Name of the Lord.**

L For there are the thrones of judgment, the thrones of the house of David.

C **Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you.**

L Peace be within your walls and quietness within your towers.

C **For my brethren and companions' sake, I pray for your prosperity.**

L Because of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek to do you good."

ROMANS 13:11–14

As you do all this, you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep. Now our salvation is nearer than when we first had faith. The night is almost over, and the day is near.

So let's get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons of light. Let's behave appropriately as people who live in the day, not in partying and getting drunk, not in sleeping around and obscene behavior, not in fighting and obsession. Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don't plan to indulge your selfish desires

MATTHEW 24:36–44

[Jesus said] "But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows. As it was in the time of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Human One. In those days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark. They didn't know what was happening until the flood came and swept them all away. The coming of the Human One will be like that. At that time there will be two men in the field. One will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill. One will be taken and the other left. Therefore, stay alert! You don't know what day the Lord is coming. But you understand that if the head of the house knew at what time the thief would come, he would keep alert and wouldn't allow the thief to break into his house. Therefore, you also should be prepared, because the Human One will come at a time you don't know."

SERMON HYMN: *The Church of Christ In Every Age*

BLESSING:

The Lord calls us to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Day of the Lord by focusing our lives on the promises of hope, the labors of love, the depths of joy, and the strengths of peace; go from here with the blessing of the Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, this day and forever.