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# Eternal Changelessness

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A Sermon By  
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Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/2016-08-28-AAA.mp3>.

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Grace Episcopal Church  
The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
August 28, 2016

Sirach 10:12-18      Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16  
Psalm 112      Luke 14:1, 7-14

A week ago today, the games of the 31<sup>st</sup> Olympiad in Rio de Janeiro concluded. Over the previous two weeks, I was totally engrossed by the games, transfixed by the stunning athleticism of the gymnasts, swimmers, sprinters, and other Olympians. The athletes' stories always suck me in, and this year was no different. I found myself rooting for the athletes, willing their success on the world stage. I had really gotten into the games and I was bummed they had reached their conclusion. But I also wanted to watch that conclusion.

So last Sunday evening, my fiancée, Sarah, and I settled down on our couch and turned on the primetime coverage of the closing ceremony. We watched the athletes traipse into the arena and take their seats. We saw the choreographed dance routines, the symbolic raising and lowering of the host country and Olympic flags. And then, we braced ourselves for what tends to be my least favorite part of the closing ceremony, the extinguishing of the Olympic cauldron.

While I enjoy watching the closing of the Olympics, I usually do *not* enjoy watching the fire of the Olympic flame being quenched at the end of the ceremony. It always seems a bit depressing to me. The merry light of the dancing flames, the symbol of the Olympic Games, extinguished into empty darkness. The imagery is a powerful reminder of change and endings.

Yet this time, something was different. The cauldron was indeed extinguished as tradition demands. But this year the flame was practically serenaded into extinction by the sonorous tones of Brazilian musician Mariene de Castro. De Castro sang, "Pelo Tempo Que Durar." The Portuguese lyrics and the music wove together to create a deeply rich melodic song, which simultaneously stirred my spirit and calmed my heart. Sarah, who was sitting next to me, turned to me and gave voice to my thoughts saying, "she makes me feel like change is okay." And indeed she did! As she sang, De Castro held her arms open wide, a warm smile on her face, while she crooned the Olympic flame from light to darkness, all the while with her song inviting spectators to join her in accepting the changes and chances of life. It was powerful. And that moment, which in all other Olympic closing ceremonies is my least favorite, became my favorite and most memorably striking moment of the ceremony, if not the games.

In watching the ceremony, I was reminded again of just how challenging change can be for me, and I think for many of us. Change can sometimes feel threatening. For me, that feeling is so present that even the symbolic extinguishing of the Olympic flame stirred up the emotional dregs within me. Change can confront us, calling our comfort into question, calling all that is familiar into question. It has the power to spark fear within our hearts. When confronted with change, we, creatures of habit that enjoy the predictable, and the controllable, sensing a threat to this status, may feel cautious or even frightened.

Think about a time in your life when you faced a major change. Perhaps an unwanted diagnoses. A move. A change in employment. A lost relationship. The beginning of a new school year. Even if the change was positive, I bet you may have experienced some apprehension, some stirring of unease. For me, this looming undertone is usually linked to my inability to control the unknown. If I had it my way, I would like to be completely in charge of what's to come, my own master entirely. And yet, that's not often the way things works. Usually, change sweeps into our lives and we are left to puzzle out our response.

But here's the good news, in the midst of the unknown, we are not alone. We are never alone. The letter to the Hebrews tells us, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." No matter what we face, we may have confidence in Christ's eternal changelessness. He is the ground of our Christian hope and endurance. His "sameness," his unshakable reliability, no matter the circumstance or passage of time, should embolden our hearts, for we know that no matter what, God is with us.

That doesn't mean we won't experience change or all its unpredictability. That doesn't mean we can avoid the harsh realities of life, nor control the unknown. What it does mean is that we have someone who has gone before us in these things. Someone who has paved the way with grace. That someone is Jesus Christ. The gospel of John tells us that in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. This Word is Jesus Christ, who was, is, and is yet to come. He has gone before us as an example, teaching us how to live and love in God's name.

While Christ is eternally changeless, Jesus of Nazareth in his earthly life and ministry was a change agent. He turned tables, flipped conventional notions upside down. Our gospel text today attests to this, presenting us with a Jesus who proclaims that the exalted will be humbled and the humbled will be exalted. Jesus calls us to embrace change, to welcome it, even to be a part of it. And when we can't he calls us to rest assured in his changelessness.

I am reminded again of Mariene de Castro's voice as the Olympic flame was extinguished. Her song at once filled listeners with peace and prodded them to embrace change. Her song, her voice, reminds me of God calling to us. Change is inevitable, but peace is possible when we recognize that we are not alone in facing the changes and chances of this life. God is with us, coaxing us, prodding us, and reminding us that Jesus Christ, has already paved the way for us, confronting the ultimate change of death and transforming it into rebirth and new life. We have nothing to fear for we have a strong rock to cling to. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is our hope and salvation. Amen.