Sermons
from Northwood United Church

"Change: Living Between Memory and Hope"
Part 1: "Imagination"
Psalm 137, Exodus 3:1-14
Will Sparks October 27, 2013

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Peter Short, with whom I spent much of the last week and who needs to be acknowledged as I begin given the fact that many of my thoughts have been shaped by his words, Peter tells the story of the a gathering of Presbytery where he lives, which takes place once a year that they fondly call the "Festival of the Annual Reports." Festive eh? Presbytery has the responsibility of oversight over congregations and fulfilling that responsibility involves, in part, reading through all the annual reports from the congregations within the bounds of the Presbytery, and there are 40. Many presbyteries take it very seriously, and Peter's Presbytery looks through all the reports carefully. One year recently, every single one of the 40 some annual reports began with, if not these exact words, something very close. "This pastoral charge is in a time of transition." And when I think about the churches I have served and the churches in our Presbytery, that would be true for every one whether the people are willing to acknowledge it or not. We live in a time of massive and comprehensive change in the church and in the world. It touches our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual live. Change.

When I say "change," what is your internal response? How about when I say "moving?" "Global economic slowdown?"

Well today I want to begin a series of sermons that I will call "Change: Living between memory and hope." Whether you are contemplating retirement, changing positions at work, changes in key relationships in your life, dealing with the changes that come with birth, aging, death, whether the changes in your life are welcome or not, I am hoping that the next five weeks will offer an opportunity for each of us and for us together to delve into the ways in which we are constantly in relationship with change, and how that effects our relationship with ourselves, and God, and the world.

Today I want to look at change from a broad perspective, and then in the coming weeks I want to look at some of the things we stumble over in the course of changes in life, grappling with denial: the truth matters when things are changing, dealing with loss: I have heard it said that people don't actually resist change, they really resist the loss that comes with change, tripping over our fear and how fears, both known and unknown, can be a force to reckon with in our lives, and finally, a recipe for embracing change.

Now I know that we all relate to the changes in our lives differently. Some of us are more inclined to preserve while others are more inclined to change things. I believe this is part of the wonderful diversity of human personality which is then shaped by our various life experiences that have led to different fundamental habits, attitudes and postures towards change. So some of us are inclined to lean away from change while others lean into it. Our foundational posture in relation to change varies.

But our attitude to change also depends on the kind of change we are looking at. Throughout the next few weeks we will be looking at two kinds of changes: the kind of change we long for, that we would work towards, instigate, change that makes the world a better place. This is the "call of Moses to free my people" kind of change. This is the kind of change that

comes on to our agenda as part of the gospel of love in the world. And we will also look at the kind of change that simply happens to us- unwelcome change to our circumstance, change that we would never have chosen but that we nonetheless have to incorporate into our lives. We sit by the unfamiliar Babylonian rivers of our lives, having lost what is precious to us, and wonder how we can sing the Lord's song in this strange new landscape of our lives. I believe that God is involved in both kinds of change, but differently, and supplies us with what we need in heart and mind and soul in both cases, but differently.

So I invite you into the landscape of change which is a landscape between: between the way it was, and the way it is going to be. Between memory and hope. And our soul is busy on this landscape and so today I want to give you three soul-words to take with you as we embark together. The first is impermanence. Nothing is permanent. Robert Frost wrote: Nothing Gold can stay.

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf,
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day
Nothing gold can stay.

Nothing is permanent. Twas ever thus. Life does not stand still. And one of the great tasks of the soul in this journey is to come to terms with life's impermanence. The way it was is not the way it is, nor the way it will be. And not everything was better the way it was. Some here will remember the days before medicare, before polio vaccine. Was it better then? There was a time when Canada, this great nation that we love, did not exist. And there will be a time again when even that which seems such a steady and solid given in our world will change. It is true of all that is precious to us. Nothing gold can stay. Time is relentless that way. First soul-word: Impermanence. And it is a soul word because it is a reality that our soul seeks to make peace with.

Second word: Imagination. I have called this series "Living between memory and hope." Both memory and hope are acts of the imagination. You may have heard it said that the past is not what it used to be. Our memories of things change because our imagination acts upon them, and that is not a bad thing. Memory is meaning as much as it is history. The stories of Jesus are as much about what he means to us as they are about what happened. They are history bourn upon the waves of our imagination, which makes them mean something to us. And so our memory is our imagination as it acts upon our past.

Likewise, hope is not the future as it will be, but rather, the future as we imagine it could be. And so our hopes are the future as our imagination acts upon it. And we live in that place between memory and hope, a place nourished, fuelled by our second soul-word imagination. It is a soul word because it fuels our life.

Finally, faith. Dealing with change throws us into the arena of faith: of moving forward without all the information, of heading out like Abraham and Sarah, not knowing the destination for certain.

When I was considering a call to ministry in the church, before I went into seminary, I was longing to know if in fact God was calling me to this vocation. I was 23 or so and I distinctly remember praying for some kind of sign that God was in this. "God, show me that this is the right step for me to take- that this is your call, because I am not sure." After all, God calls us right? And that should be kind of definite right? God doesn't sorta kinda call people. "Moses I

was kinda thinking you might consider turning around and heading back to Egypt to free my people. What do ya think?" No, a call is a call right? Clarity, right? But that wasn't the way for me. And I distinctly remember being at a service in Nanaimo one evening, grappling with my uncertainty, asking again for a sign, some indication that I could hang on it, and I got nothing. And I remember thinking, "Ok God. It's going to be like that eh. You are asking me to take a step without knowing, to take a step in faith. Ok then." Certainty would be madness. Certainty on this road would go against the while project. In this landscape of change faith is what we need, not certainty. Our confidence is not rooted in what we know but who we trust. That's what happened for Moses looking puzzlingly into that bush that burned and would not be consumed. David in the face of Goliath, Daniel in the lions den, the people of Israel in that strange place feeling like a strange people. None of us know really what is around the corner.

We move out into the changing landscape of our lives anyway, aware of the impermanence of all things, engaging our imagination as it offers us both memory and hope, not knowing anything for certain, but trusting in in the one who made us, knows us, loves us, and remakes us every day. Amen.