

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**November 22, 2009**  
**Revelation 1:4-8**

**“The Never-changing, Ever-changing Jesus”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

I am not clairvoyant. I wish I were but I am not.  
But I can tell you with absolute certainty what a huge percentage of the  
300,000,000 people living in this country will be having for lunch on Thursday.  
Turkey.  
According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, about 45 million turkeys are  
cooked and eaten in the U.S. on Thanksgiving Day each year.

We are a people who like traditions.  
As human beings, we generally like things to stay the same.  
It makes things predictable.  
We want things to stay the way they always have been—that makes things  
familiar, known, comfortable.  
We like to know what to expect and what to look forward to.  
And so this Thursday do not switch the Thanksgiving turkey with a roast leg of  
lamb. That just won't do.

We know what we like, we like what we know, and we want to keep things that  
way.  
Everyone in Lee Satterfield's family knows she is bringing her famous dinner rolls  
this Thursday. They are all looking forward to Lee's dinner rolls—it is just not  
Thanksgiving without Lee's dinner rolls.  
With the O'Dea family, well you can count on Jack's special mashed potatoes and  
Linda's gravy. Don't try to have a Thanksgiving dinner without them, people will  
boycott.  
With Kayla and Coni, it's a special pumpkin pie. Don't make a switch, no Boston  
Cream Pie on Thursday. Stick with the pumpkin pie that is known and loved.  
With Maureen Mathers there's a special turkey gravy, butternut squash and apple  
pie. They are not interested in innovation on Thanksgiving. Stay the course with  
the winners that are tried and true.

With Cora and Esther, who spend Thanksgiving together, they must have the cranberry sauce that Cora's mother's used to make and Cora now makes. Don't touch that tradition. It works, leave it alone.

And for Lynn Fogg and Mary there's the Kavanagh Stuffing. This stuffing recipe, passed down from Lynn's Mom to Lynn to Lynn's daughter, is sacred and it simply is not Thanksgiving without the Kavanagh stuffing, so don't mess with a good thing.

We like traditions, we like sameness, we like knowing what to expect.

Don't throw us a curve ball. We don't really like CHANGE.

Oh I know, we have a President who campaigned promising change, but at best we're ambivalent about change.

Our entire life depends on change yet people fear and work to avoid it.

Bookstores are crammed with self-help guides on how to create change personally and manage it professionally but people actively resist it.

Change: sometimes it is the only constant in our lives, and other times people desperately want change but cannot seem to muster it.

Change. Our friend. Our enemy. Our companion.

Often in churches, change is either missing or massive.

We are either very stuck, in a disappointing relationship, an intractable depression, a dead-end job, or we are cycling through relationships with break-neck speed and changing jobs quickly in search of the perfect fit. Sometimes it seems we need a fresh new wind to fill our sails and move us out of the doldrums, others times we need an anchor in the storm to make all the changes stop.

Change is both inevitable and difficult—which is why we turn to an unchanging God. And the image of God as an unchanging deity is the image we get in today's reading from the Book of Revelation.

Those of you in our current Bible Study class know that Revelation is the final book in the Bible—the very end of the New Testament—and it a confusing, alarming, even upsetting piece of Scripture. The image of Jesus in the Book of Revelation seems more like the work of a 1960s hippie high on LSD than the words of Scripture. The Book of Revelation is full of dragons and creatures with wings, fires and apocalyptic predictions. Overall the Book of Revelation is quite a challenge. BUT today's reading from Chapter 1 has none of that scary stuff. Today's passage is comforting and reassuring.

Let's put today's reading in context...John, the author of the Book of Revelation, was writing to and about the early Church emerging in Palestine after Jesus' death. The early Christians understood God as commander in chief of both the culture and the country. But they lived under the yoke of imperialism—they were an occupied people, ruled and persecuted by the Roman Empire that enforced its own pagan religion and claimed Caesar as god.

In today's reading, John is lifting up a God that gives "grace and peace," (vs. 4) for grace and peace were needed, they were in short supply in the lives of the early Christians who were persecuted by a foreign government that imposed its will on them.

John refers to God as the one "who is and who was and who is to come." Like Alpha and Omega in the Greek alphabet, John is saying, God is before and after all else (vs. 8). Because John and his community are living through difficult times, he is trying to bring stability, reassurance and comfort to his people: THIS God, he is telling them, OUR God, controls the past, present and future. God is eternal, John is saying. Unchanging. The same as yesterday, today and tomorrow.

John is working hard to provide the early Christians, a persecuted people, with the vision of an unchanging God who will be there, present to them, throughout time—a wise, comforting parent figure who stands in sharp contrast to Caesar and the torment they are receiving under Caesar's rule.

"Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come," John writes to soothe and uplift.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty," John writes to bring hope and constancy, steadiness and permanence in a changing, unsteady and frightening world.

And so our reading for today presents us with an unchanging God, and an unchanging Jesus who John calls "the faithful witness."

But I ask you: is that how you, how we experience God and Jesus today?

Are God and Jesus unchanging for us?

Is that how we experience God, is that how we know Jesus, unchanging through time?

How would I answer those questions? I experience God in my life through the presence of Jesus. And I experience Jesus as both never-changing and ever-changing in my life.

I experience God through the presence of Jesus who is for me a being, a companion who is an unchanging source of love, wisdom and comfort. The unconditional, never-changing love that God showers on all God's people, which I experience through Jesus, is a given—it is the rock on which I plant my feet, the foundation of my life.

And yet at the same time, I find that Jesus, who walks with me and talks with me, has changed throughout my life.

The Jesus I experience in my life is both the never-changing and ever-changing presence of God.

When I was a child, the Jesus I was introduced to in Sunday School was the Good Shepherd. I remember pictures of Jesus in my Sunday School materials, he had a lamb draped across his shoulders. He was the soft and soothing, quiet and loving Good Shepherd who called children to come to him and cared for each little person.

That Good Shepherd Jesus is a never-changing image in my mind, I was imprinted with the Good Shepherd Jesus when I was very young and that imprint has stayed with me. And I appreciate the never-changing Good Shepherd Jesus.

But as I grew and changed, Jesus grew and changed with me.

As I matured my faith matured and a new layer was added to my understanding of Jesus. Jesus became a more complex and multi-layered being. Added to the Good Shepherd Jesus was the Good Radical Jesus who turned over the tables of the money-changers in the Temple, the radical Jesus who challenged and contradicted Scribes and Pharisees, the radical Jesus who quietly transformed life in the Roman Empire by redefining power, by being a King without money, weapons or soldiers, by travelling with a scraggly band of believers and talking about how the first shall be last and last first, how the meek will inherit the earth and how the poor are especially blessed.

As I grew and changed, Jesus changed too.

Added to my early understanding and experience of Jesus as the Good Shepherd was an understanding of him as a nonviolent revolutionary talking about creating the kingdom of God on earth.

The more I walk and talk with Jesus the more he remains the same and yet the more he seems to change. It is a paradox I have had to learn to live with. Jesus is the same companion and friend, teacher and savior I have walked and talked with for decades and yet he changes and surprises me. This summer when I was hospitalized I had to have an MRI. Frightened about being in that dark enclosed space, I went into that experience with serious trepidation. The technicians put a

“panic button” in my left hand. “Press this,” they said, “if you get claustrophobic and cannot stand it. We’ll come in and get you out.”

Minutes into the MRI, I thought, “I cannot stand it. I am going to press that button in my little hand. I thought I could bear it but I cannot.”

Then I realized that Jesus had squished into the MRI machine with me and was there holding my right hand. He had changed shape and form. The MRI machine is narrow, it is awfully close quarters in there. How did Jesus fit in there with me? I don’t know. But somehow he did and the never-changing, ever-changing Jesus was in there with me, smashed up against me, holding my right hand.

I never pressed that panic button.

Some of you have told me how Jesus has changed in your lifetimes. You have talked about experiencing God as angry and disapproving and Jesus as a distant, shadowy figure—you felt judged and unloved because you are gay. But your experience of God and your relationship with Jesus changed when you finally understood that you were born perfect and whole and that God loves you, Jesus is close to you, and you are cherished just as you are. Jesus changed from a distant figure to a loving companion. The never-changing, ever changing Jesus drew close to you and wiped your tears away.

Change is not something most people rush toward and embrace with open arms. We fear, dread and avoid it. And yet we need it.

And it is important to remember that John writing in the Book of Revelation was right: some things about God and Jesus are never-changing...God’s love for us, Jesus’ demonstrated commitment to justice, God’s quiet presence in our lives, Jesus’ compassion towards those on the margins of society, God’s care for all of Creation, Jesus’ courage as he faced the cross.

We know all these to be constant, stable, never-changing.

But we also know that as we change Jesus changes with us, as we mature and our faith deepens Jesus is different, a new side of this remarkable fully divine and fully human being is revealed to us, a new layer is added, a deeper understanding opens before us.

The Jesus of our childhood remains precious and dear to us, and the Jesus of our adult lives brings new insights, new complexity, new awareness.

Jesus’ close presence in times of fear, sorrow and need is never-changing.

Jesus’ ability to comfort us by squeezing our hand in an MRI machine is surprising and new.

This Thanksgiving we are delighted by all the things that won't have changed from last year or the past 10, 20 or 30 years—Maureen's family will be happy to eat her same old apple pie one more time. Linda, Denis and Beth will be thrilled to dig into Jack's same old mashed potatoes again this year. Lee's family will butter those same old dinner rolls just like they did last year and they'll savor every bite. And Lynn and Mary will enjoy the Kavanagh stuffing this year, next year and for years to come.

Change is not welcome when it comes to family traditions. But change is welcome when our relationship with Jesus is able to stretch and grow, when new experiences, new insights, and new depths are plumbed on our spiritual journeys.

This Thanksgiving I am grateful for my family, my God, and my church family.  
I am grateful for my health and the health of my loved ones.  
I am grateful for my father's long and productive life.  
I am grateful for music, beauty and art, for the seasons and roaring fires.  
I am grateful for small churches that dream big dreams.  
And this year I am feeling grateful for change....though I dread and resist it.  
This Thanksgiving I am truly grateful for change and growth.  
Amen.