



**MYERS PARK
BAPTIST
CHURCH**

**A faith community
on a journey seeking
a welcoming, loving,
and just world.**

“THE GRIEF OF CHANGE”

Sermon Delivered by Dr Tim Moore

I Kings 19:7-15, 18

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Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Myers Park Baptist Church. For 83 years this congregation was known by that name. And now we have a new name. Next week at our Celebration Sunday we will reveal our new logo and tagline. While there is great power with change, it also brings grief.

Some of you have spoken with me about your grief with the name change. But it's not the name itself, it seems, but what the name represents. To say Myers Park Baptist Church was to call up its history and heritage, and for many of you, that's personal. The church nationally broadcast on Christmas Eve, the education program touted by American Baptists as a model of innovation and methodology, the congregation that in the midst of school desegregation voted to be “open to all, closed to none,” the decision by this church to defy Southern Baptists by welcoming and affirming persons who identify as gay or lesbian or transgender, all of that and more was emotionally tied up in that name. To change our name, for all the good reasons we did it, was to also say those days are gone and a new day has come.

So, how do you face the grief in order to tap into the power of change?

There's a backstory to today's scripture passage. You can read the biggest part of the backstory in I Kings 18. During Elijah's time serving as a prophet in ancient Israel, the nation was ruled by a corrupt and malicious queen and king. Jezebel was her name, and it became infamous. For centuries, to be called a “Jezebel” was a great insult.

One of things she did was to change worship in the land of Israel. She empowered the priests of Baal, a religion of the Canaanite people who lived in the region before the Israelites arrived. Jezebel favored them over the worship of Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Elijah resisted Jezebel's changes. **You might consider this the “culture wars of 9th century BC.”** In Chapter 18 he proposed a challenge between him and all the prophets of Baal to prove which religion—which god—was the true one. According to the story, a firebomb fell from heaven at the end of Elijah's prayer, proving that the LORD was the true God. The divine pyrotechnic show brought the challenge to a dramatic end.

Unfortunately, afterwards the crowd hunted down the prophets of Baal and killed them by the river. An ugly end to the story. Elijah the prophet was in trouble. Queen Jezebel vowed that she would do to Elijah what he had done to the prophets of Baal. Elijah feared for his life. **So, he ran home. Not the home he grew up in, but the spiritual home of his faith.**

Most people do not realize the significance of where Elijah ran because the writer of I Kings called the place Mt. Horeb, as does the author of Deuteronomy. But elsewhere in the Bible, it is called by a different name. **Mt. Horeb is also called Mt. Sinai**, which is the name most American Christians recognize as the place where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. AND this was also the place where Moses saw the Burning Bush and heard the voice of God tell him to return to Egypt in order to free his people from Pharaoh's hand.

You can see why Elijah ran to Mt. Sinai/Horeb. It was a holy place. God had spoken to Moses there—to free God's people. Maybe God would tell him to free God's people from Queen Jezebel. On that mountain, God had given Moses the Ten Commandments and the laws to guide the Jewish people. Maybe God would give Elijah something new to guide the people.

When Elijah arrived on Mt. Sinai a word from the LORD came to him, saying, **“What are you doing here, Elijah?”** Elijah told God that while he has been faithful, everything has changed: nobody goes to church anymore, the country is on the road to ruin, and he alone is left. Elijah is nostalgic for days gone by and sees himself as the sole protector of the way things were.

God tells him to leave the cave and stand on the side of the mountain for the LORD is about to pass by. Now, this is a significant moment for when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, God allowed Moses to see God momentarily as God passed by. You can read about it in Exodus 33. This is why Elijah ran away to Mt. Sinai—to recapture what God had done in the old days. **Now, God would do for him what God had done for Moses and the old ways would be new again.**

So, Elijah walked forward and stood at the mouth of the cave up on that high mountain. And there came up a great wind, so strong that it was splitting rocks on the mountain. When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments thunder and lightning had whipped up a wind that frightened the people down in the valley. Elijah looked around for God, **but this time God was not in the wind.**

And then an earthquake began shaking the ground beneath Elijah's feet. Just as when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments the whole mountain shook violently. Elijah looked around for God, **but this time God wasn't in the earthquake.**

And then a raging fire came towards Elijah. When God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, the Lord descended on the mountain in fire and the whole mountain was covered in smoke. And when God first spoke to Moses it was through a burning bush on the same mountain. **Surely, God was coming to Elijah in the fire. But this time God wasn't in the fire.**

Elijah had gone home, a spiritual home, but he didn't find God in the ways God had once been revealed to Moses. The old ways no longer worked.

Edwin Friedman in his book, *A Failure of Nerve*, speaks about the ways in which systems—families, companies, societies—get stuck and how to get unstuck. He uses the historical example of what Christopher Columbus’s journey to what we now call the Western Hemisphere in 1492 did to Europe. Now, I don’t want us to get bogged down in what that “discovery” did to the people living in this hemisphere over the course of the next few centuries, which was horrific and included genocide and slavery. That’s a different sermon for a different day.

Europe at the time was a stagnate society, hampered by outbreaks of the plague, the breakdown of the feudal order, and the Catholic Church’s rigidity and corruption. Outside of the printing press there hadn’t been any major innovations and inventions in ages. **Europeans could not think in different ways, because they could not imagine life different than what they had experienced.** Columbus’s “discovery” of the Western Hemisphere changed all of that. It told them that they didn’t know everything about the world, that there was an unknown, unlimited number of horizons to be explored. It caused them to ask different questions, inspired new ideas to solve the new problems and obstacles that now were before them. The Age of Discovery had dawned upon Europe. Within a decade of Columbus’s voyages, “Michelangelo is sculpting *David*, and Leonardo has completed the *Mona Lisa*; half a century later, by the time Drake has reached San Francisco (1570), Shakespeare [and] Cervantes [are writing and] rising to the top. Opera has its beginning.” The Protestant Reformation was transforming the Church. The watch was invented—allowing people to measure time and precious schedule appointments. Space was observed more intensely, and experiments with lenses increased, leading to the first telescope. The first newspapers were sold in Europe, spreading news widely and quickly [Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, ****].

An old view of the world had to die in order for a new one to unleash innovative thinking in Europe.

Here’s the thing: **you have to bury the past in order to step into the future.** That involves grief. It involves finding a way to honor the past, document it and learn its lessons, and name the principles and values that will you will carry forward. Then, you must let go of the past, because as long as you hold onto it, you can’t fully live into the future.

Now look, I say that as a guy that doesn’t really like change. My brothers used to joke about my reluctance to use new technologies that I wasn’t Baptist, I was Reformed Amish. I’m a 20th century guy, trying to live in the 21st century. I mean, I still drive a stick-shift. My jeans are button fly—which I guess makes me a 19th century guy. Look, I get it. I hold onto things as long as I can. And it’s okay to hold onto those things as long as you’d like. Until they stop working.

One day my left knee is going to tell me it no longer wants to drive stick shift, that it’s tired of pushing in that stupid clutch over and over and over again in stop and go traffic. I’ll have to ice it down after driving through town. Then, I’ll have to have rest days for my knee between driving days. Marina will call me to ask if we can meet over lunch on Wednesday and I’ll have to say that I can’t because I have to ice my knee down on Wednesday, my driving days are on Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday. “Why Tim,” Marina’s going to say with her soft British accent and then pause and say—and you know what’s going to happen because she’s done it with you, she’s going to cut through all the noise and get right to the issue, “Why don’t you buy a car with automatic

transmission? Instead of icing your knee down and popping ibuprofen and only driving three days a week, **what are you holding onto?**”

That’s the question dancing around the grief of change: what are you holding onto?

Elijah is not invited to go out to the mouth of the cave to meet God. God is not going to stick around for a while. God’s not stopping for a drink, or to have dinner. God is passing by. That’s it, just passing by. God is on the move, and if Elijah hurries, he just might glimpse God. That’s all he gets. That’s all any of us gets, just a glimpse of God, while God is passing by. This God of changes placed us on an Earth that spins on its axis and orbits around the sun creating constant change of day and night along with the four seasons. God created living beings and plants that are constantly evolving. God is always passing by.

Elijah ran to Mt. Sinai to see God, just as Moses had seen God. And now he was getting his chance. But God wasn’t in the wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire—all things that had accompanied God’s visit to the mountain when Moses received the Ten Commandments. When Elijah kept looking back, doing things the old way, when Elijah kept holding onto the past, he couldn’t see God; God was no longer there.

Then, Elijah heard the sheer silence. A completely different experience from what he was expecting. The meaning of this story isn’t that God is in silence; that if we want to hear God, we should meditate silently—although just to be clear, I’m not dissing silent meditation. The point of the story is that God was not in the old ways. The sheer silence was completely different from the way God approached Moses on the same mountain before. So, if we went to Mt. Sinai today and heard sheer silence God would probably not be in it, because God has moved on.

Despite running to Mt. Sinai to find God in the old ways, Elijah kept listening for God, even in this new and different experience, he saw God passing by, and God said, “Elijah, what are you doing here?”

Elijah repeated his sad story of how nobody attends church anymore and the country is headed for ruin and he alone is left. Whereupon God tells him that’s not true, he’s not the only one. There are thousands of people in Israel who still faithfully worship the LORD. And then God tells him to go down the mountain and get busy doing the things God wants him to do.

For 83 years this congregation was known as Myers Park Baptist Church and we did some amazing things, things we should be proud of. But the old ways have stopped working. It’s time to honor the past, learn its lessons, clarify its principles and values and then let it go; so we can build a new future as Myers Park Covenant Church.

May God help us to be faithful. AMEN.