

Change: An Invitation to the Future

Rev. Todd Freeman's Final Sunday at College Hill

Deuteronomy 31:1-3a; 34:5-9; Joshua 1:1-9 1 Peter 4:7-11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa April 26, 2026 Rev. Todd B. Freeman

Eighteen years ago, we began a shared adventure. None of us knew exactly where it would lead. We could not have predicted the joys and the sorrows, the risks and the rewards, the steady faithfulness and the surprising newness that would shape our life together. But here we are.

Presbyterian pastor Rev. Stephen Van Kuiken once preached a sermon entitled *Don't Look Back* to a congregation facing change. In it he said:

'Don't look back' is a call to adventure beyond the safeties of the past, a call to risk, a call to what may be, a call to creativity, a call simply to life. It is a call to act upon the inner stirring of the heart, not to put it off but act now. Life cannot be put on hold, or it is not life.

Those words speak powerfully to this moment. You, the congregation of College Hill, are facing inevitable change—my departure, an interim season, and eventually the calling of a new installed pastor who will help lead you into the future God is already preparing. And after reflecting on Van Kuiken's words, I have come to see that our journey together has indeed been an adventure beyond the safeties of the past—a call to risk, a call to creativity, a call simply to life. We have not always known exactly where we were going. But we have trusted that God was going ahead of us.

The former president of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins, was once asked what single lesson he would want his students to carry with them. Without hesitation he said, "I'd teach them to cope with change, which is inevitable." You don't need me to remind you that change happens. We've lived through it together—cultural shifts, denominational challenges, personal losses, societal upheavals, and even a global pandemic. What is helpful to remember, however, is that just as not all change is good, neither is all change bad. Sometimes it's simply that: change.

The prophet Isaiah speaks into uncertainty with God's promise: "Thus says the Lord... I am about to do a new thing." God is always doing a new thing. God is doing a new thing in your life right now. God is certainly doing a new thing in mine. And God is doing a new thing in this community of faith. **The question is not whether change will come. The question is whether we will have the courage to see it as invitation rather than threat.**

One biblical commentator writes, "We are asked to be willing to release our grip on the past enough to take in the signs of something else—a future that is about to be open before us." **Releasing our grip on the past does not mean erasing it.** It does not mean forgetting the stories, the laughter, the tears, the baptisms, the weddings, the memorial services, the church retreats, the hard conversations, the faithful decisions. It means holding them with gratitude rather than clinging to them with fear.

Great 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich, in *The Shaking of the Foundations*, wrote, **“The first thing about the new is that we cannot force it and cannot calculate it. All we can do is to be ready for it.”** That has been at the forefront of my ministry with you. Not to force the new. Not to calculate it. But to be ready for it. To cultivate a community attentive to the Spirit. To ask not, “How do we preserve what was?” but “How do we respond to what God is doing now?” And I believe you are ready. If you doubt that, look around. Look at the depth of wisdom and compassion in this congregation. Look at the resilience you have shown. Look at your commitment to justice, to inclusion, to thoughtful faith. Look at your willingness to wrestle with hard questions. And then look within your own heart. **You are ready.**

The writer of Ecclesiastes tells us that “to everything there is a season.” There is a season to plant and a season to uproot. A season to weep and a season to laugh. A season to embrace and a season to let go. **This is a season of letting go. And that is never easy.**

One of the reasons I chose the closing chapter of Deuteronomy for this final sermon is because of the parallels it offers. Moses led the people out of Egypt. He walked with them through wilderness wandering. He interceded for them. He taught them. He bore with them. He loved them. And then he stood at the edge of the Promised Land. He could see it. He could bless it. But he would not cross over with them. Like Moses, I have been blessed to journey a long time with you. We have navigated wilderness seasons and glimpsed promised possibilities. **But now I will not be crossing over with you into the future God has in store for this congregation.** The Israelites wept for Moses for thirty days. There was grief. There was honoring. There was a season of mourning. And then it ended. **Please know that I, too, am grieving.** Eighteen years of shared ministry shapes a heart. But pastoral experience—and simple human wisdom—reminds me that “this, too, shall pass.”

The story does not end, however, with Moses' death. It continues immediately in the book of Joshua. **Leadership changes. The mission continues. God's faithfulness remains.** God's words to Joshua are words for you: “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you... Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

You may not yet know, metaphorically, who your Joshua will be. The interim season may feel uncertain. But the promise does not depend on a particular pastor. It rests in the character of God. As I have often said—and will say one last time—God is always *with* you. And God is always *for* you. That is as true in transition as it is in stability.

As I look toward what I expect will be an active retirement, I take that same promise with me. God goes ahead. God walks beside. God remains faithful. So how shall you live in this next chapter? Let me leave you with the wisdom of 1 Peter 4:7–11, paraphrased for this moment:

The end of a season is at hand; therefore, be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love one another deeply, since love covers a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality without grumbling. As each of you has received gifts, use them to serve others, as good stewards of God's varied grace. Speak and serve in ways that glorify God through Jesus Christ.

Let me summarize that as my final charge:

Stay motivated.
Pray.
Be loving.
Practice hospitality.
Don't complain.
Use your gifts to serve others.
And glorify God.

And I will add: **Strive to live together in unity.** Put aside grudges, personal agendas, and any need for power or control. Transitions can tempt us toward anxiety and turf-protecting. Resist that temptation. **Continue to be an inclusive community of faith** where all people are made to feel welcome and cared for—where LGBTQ siblings, doubters and seekers, longtime Presbyterians and spiritual refugees alike can encounter the very real, very present Christ. **Listen—individually and collectively—for the voice of God.** Remember that it is often not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but in the still, small voice. **Practice discernment.** Ask not merely, “What do we prefer?” but “Where is the Spirit leading?”

Look back with gratitude.
Look forward with courage.
Look around with love.

With the deepest appreciation and heartfelt gratitude, I thank you for the privilege of serving as your pastor. I carry with me memories too numerous to name and relationships that have shaped my faith and my life. May God richly bless you in the days ahead. May you be strong and courageous. May you embrace the new thing God is doing. And may all glory and power belong to God, now and forever.

Blessings and Amen.