Sunday, March 22, 1987
**IT'S ALWAYS BEEN THIS WAY (NO. 3 IN A SERIES: LIES WE TELL EACH OTHER)**
Isaiah 11:6-9; Revelation 21:1-5

It is said that Galileo, who was summoned to the Inquisition in Rome for his radical views on the nature of the universe, at times showed his telescope to the leading sages of the day. The result generally fell into three categories of response:

A few people were amazed by what they saw and were open to another view of the universe — they were not afraid of new knowledge which could threaten their present view of what they believed.

A second group, however, looked into the telescope and then peered around at the other end of the telescope, convinced that Galileo had pasted something on the glass: the picture of a planet, the moon, whatever. They did not want to believe what they were seeing and didn't. This group of people rather believed the lies—"It's always been that way." Or another way of putting it: nothing changes.

The third category of people simply refused to look through the lens. They didn't want to see anything that might make them change their view of the world. They didn't want to entertain any new possibilities at all. They didn't want their old beliefs challenged. They were afraid of new possibilities, of new truth. They also were comfortable with the lie, "It's always been this way."

If you had lived then, which of these three groups would you have been part of?

What is it that makes us human beings afraid of change? Afraid of new truth? Afraid of new ways of doing things? I was talking with a man the other day, and he said to me in all seriousness, "I can't think of a single change that has improved things." I quickly asked him in return, "What about the indoor toilet and running water inside the house?" He then reluctantly admitted that perhaps I had a case in point.

"It's always been this way." We tell others and we tell ourselves this lie over and over again. There's a certain kind of security in trying to keep things the way we think they've always been.

Here's a way of looking at change and what makes it so difficult for us to accept that has been helpful to me. Let's begin with the word "paradigm." A paradigm is a model or a pattern. It is a shared set of assumptions. It's something like a filter through which we see the world. Each one of us sees people, events, and the world around us through some kind of paradigm. The paradigm helps make some sense out of the world. Or to put it another way — a paradigm is a conceptual theme.

Not too many years ago, Thomas Kuhn, a physicist who became a well-known professor of the history of science, wrote a book called, "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions." He showed in this book how science imposes patterns or paradigms on reality in order to better explain how the universe works.

For example, a famous historical paradigm is the Ptolemaic view of the world. Here's the Earth in the middle of the universe, for as any fool can plainly see, the sun comes up in the east,

moves overhead, and sets in the west, and the stars move around in very predictable courses. Ptolemy's science won out in its day because it explained the world better than its competitors.

However, by the 16th century, some advanced astronomers were saying that this paradigm, this idea of how the universe is organized, had too many discrepancies. They saw things happening which did not fit this pattern. So, people like Copernicus began to look for a better way to explain the universe, a new paradigm. The Earth, said Copernicus, moves around the sun.

But new paradigms are not easily accepted because of the lie we tell each other—"It's always been this way." Then religious people go on to say — God made it this way, and God doesn't change things. We never stop to consider that our perception or interpretation of the way we think God made something might be faulty. We have paradigms that we put on God.

Copernicus was cautious in proposing his new paradigm. Galileo, who through his studies of the universe came to agree with Copernicus, was also cautious, and he was genuinely surprised when he was called to Rome before the cardinals of the church who were certain they knew how God had put the universe together.

In Rome, they took him downstairs and showed him the thumbscrews and the rack. Galileo was seventy, and he recanted. The establishment was so eager to silence him that it introduced a forgery into his prosecution. Galileo spent the rest of his life under house arrest, and the official church view continued — the sun moves around the Earth. "It's always been this way."

Today we live according to the latest version of how the universe functions. This view affects our behavior and our thoughts, just as previous versions affected those who lived with them.

Paradigms are hard to change because we have so much invested in them. New paradigms do not get adopted because they are neater and work better than the old ones. We like to believe that it's always been a certain way.

In fact, those who propose new paradigms, new ways of understanding the world and we as human beings in it — new ways of understanding God and how God works — are often persecuted and killed. They are considered very dangerous. Such people are called radicals and revolutionaries.

Jesus Christ is an example. He challenged the lie—"It's always been this way." Jesus proposed that God is always doing new things, and that we human beings can grow in our knowledge and understanding of how God is working in the creation. Time and time again, Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said of old — but I say unto you."

Many people in Jesus' time believed that God loved them more than God loved other people — and that it has always been that way. But Jesus said, "God loves all people. God so loved the whole world, that God came to dwell among us."

The problem is, as Jesus knew, that we frequently use the lie, "It's always been this way," to justify the status quo. Here are some examples.

Women are to be subordinate to men. People defend this belief and practice by saying: “It’s always been this way.” But it hasn’t always been this way, and even if it had, that does not mean it has to be this way now.

The practice of slavery at one time was defended with the lie—"It’s always been this way.”

I hear people today saying — there have always been poor people among us, and we’ll always have the poor with us in the future — therefore we shouldn’t worry very much about trying to do away with poverty. Some even take a statement out of context made by Jesus in regard to poor people to defend the status quo. As Jesus was nearing his trial and crucifixion, a woman had anointed him with expensive ointment, and some of Jesus’ followers criticized her for wasting the expensive perfume. They said it could’ve been sold and the money given to the poor. It was then that Jesus said, “You will always have the poor with you, but you won’t have me.” In other words, you have a lot of time to take care of the poor, and you should, but this woman has done a beautiful thing for me now as I am facing the most difficult period in my life.

I hear people saying, “From the beginning of time we human beings have had wars; we’ve been fighting with one another. It’s always been this way — so there’s nothing that can be done about it.”

Again, it hasn’t always been this way. In fact, new studies in anthropology are now suggesting that what distinguished we human beings from the apes and other so-called lower animals was our ability to cooperate. To work together, to become members of social units, to gather and store food.

This is in contrast to an earlier theory, which following Darwin, had suggested that what distinguished we human beings from other animals was our ability to make and use weapons. These early theories went on to suggest that male dominance was a human trait rooted in the prowess of men to hunt and kill animals. Now, newer theories in anthropology are saying that the real foundation of human progress is to be found in the woman as the “gatherer.”

Such theories go on to suggest that the forces shaping the human species were not violence and competition, but peaceableness and cooperation. These theories further suggest that early human beings didn’t even hunt animals at all.

No doubt anthropologists will continue to discuss and debate these theories; however, the point for us is that it is a lie to assume that “it’s always been a certain way.”

As Christians in our free church tradition, we believe, as Pastor John Robinson put it when he was saying farewell to those coming to this country on the ship called the Mayflower—"Remember there is yet more light and truth to break forth from God’s holy word.”

God’s revelation is continuous. We never know all there is to know, and according to the Bible, “God is always making things new.” That’s what gives us hope as Christians. We believe that the purpose of the church is the increase among people of the love of God and neighbor. Notice the word—"increase.”

Back in the Old Testament, the prophets knew that things would not always be a certain way. Creation is not frozen in a certain fixed state, but is continuous and ongoing.

Thus Isaiah, in the passage read earlier, looked forward to the day when “the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

This is not the vision of someone who believes “It’s always been this way.” Rather, it is the vision of a creation that is moving toward a goal of peace and harmony in all of God’s creation.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we believe that we are already a part of this new creation, and we are co-workers with God in helping bring this new creation into being for all people everywhere. We are co-workers with God who is making all things new. So, when anyone says to you, “It’s always been this way,” as a Christian you can challenge that statement and tell them the truth. It hasn’t always been this way and it won’t always be this way. We can help bring positive changes for the good into being because God is already at work among us. That truly is good news for all of us. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Have you found yourself saying, “It’s always been this way.” Think of some of the ways you have used this statement.

What kinds of changes in the world and in your life bother you the most? What makes change difficult for you?

What do you fear most about the future? Do you think we human beings have the ability to manage change, to guide it?

What does the phrase “Kingdom of God,” or “Kingdom of Heaven” mean to you? Do you see the Kingdom of God as being present in the creation now?

What are some of the paradigms that are current today in shaping our view of the world and of human beings? What paradigms do we impose on God?