A very wise man, a very long time ago, said
that you can never put your foot in the same river twice.

You cannot step into a flowing river
and expect to find yourself
in quite the same place you were
the last time you tested the water with your toes.

Even under what may seem a calm, still surface,
mighty currents flow and sediments swirl.

A river is always changing.

And so are you, and so am I,
and so is everyone and everything we know.

This ancient Greek philosopher, Heraclitus,
also said that “change is the only thing that endures,”
that “change alone is unchanging.”

And it’s true.

Everything around us is always in a state of flux.

We ourselves are always in the middle of becoming
what we are and what we will be.

But though change is the way of the world
and a central fact of life,
it’s striking how often we resist it,
how often we actively work to hold it back
and to try to keep it at bay.

How much heartache we create for ourselves
by holding fiercely to what was
rather than embracing what is.
The Buddhists have taught us this for a long time—
that the source of our suffering is rooted in our attachments,
in holding on to the illusion
that we can somehow freeze the river
and hang on forever to some precious, shining moment in time.

But, even with our best efforts,
the world doesn’t work that way.

If I had to sum up what my work as a minister involves,
I’d say that it’s simply about helping people to cope
with the changes in their lives:
those transitions, those turning point moments,
when everything is slowly or suddenly different
and nothing seems quite the same:
birth and death,
graduation and retirement,
madriage or the loss of a love.

Those are some of the “biggies,” of course,
but there are others, too.

Those countless little changes we see
as our bodies and our minds age.

Those changes we measure
in the faces and lives of those near and dear to us.

Those changes that take our breath away,
when we see someone for the first time in a long time,
and realise—as though we’ve had a mirror held up to us—that the ever-changing river does, indeed, flow on and on.

One of my mentors often said
that we create community around us
so that we will have people to bear witness to our lives.

I’ve come to believe that to be true,
and I’ve come to see it
as one of the most important gifts we give to one another
in a community of memory and hope such as this.

To bear witness to each other’s lives.
To bear witness, together, to life itself.
But, even here, of course, change comes, too.
I mean, here we are,
sitting in the loading dock of an old post office.¹

We have gathered today in this shelter of sorts, this strange boat, amid the churning waters of uncertainty, at what is hopefully the beginning of the end of the pandemic, as our nation and our world mourns the death of the Queen, and marks what, on so many levels, feels like the end of an age.

We gather at the close of a summer that has emphatically proved to us once again the mounting perils of climate change.

And we gather on the 200th day of our proxy war with Russia, which promises to have no quick end in sight.

We are living through a time of tremendous upheaval.
At a true hinge of human history.

The river around us is swirling ever onward.

And it’s fair to feel in this moment that we’re struggling upstream through some pretty serious Class Six rapids.

The question of our times is in how we respond.

Whether we sink or swim in these waters.

Whether we paddle with all our might against the current.

Whether we seek to somehow change the course of the river itself.

Or whether we can come eventually to embrace the ebb and flow of it all, accepting the wild adventure that we’re on, while holding on to our deepest values and clinging to one another until we make it through

¹ This sermon was preached on the congregation’s first Sunday at the property that will be its future home—a building that previously served as a Canada Post Office.
to more manageable waters.

I don’t fully know the answer to this question.

And I doubt there is just one.

If anything, it seems, we need many strategies, a variety of approaches to meet life’s tough conditions as they come at us.

Each one of us adapting as best we can to the evolving circumstances we face.

But what I do know is that though we can’t turn back the tides of change, though we can’t always control what’s happening outside our little boat, there is some peace to be found by learning to ride the waves rather than be battered by them.

To be like the little duck in a poem by Donald Babcock, “a duck,” that he says, “rid[es] the ocean [waves far] beyond the surf.”

Babcock’s poem goes on:

This is one sort of duck [who] cuddles in the swells;

He isn’t cold, and he is thinking things over.

There is a big heaving in the Atlantic and he is part of it,

He looks a bit like a Mandarin, or the Lord Buddha, meditating under the Bo Tree.

But he has hardly enough above the eyebrows to be a philosopher.

He has poise, however, which is what a philosopher must have.

[And] He can rest while the Atlantic heaves, because he rests in the Atlantic.

Probably he doesn’t know how large the Atlantic is.

And neither do you. But he realizes it.
And what does he do, I ask you?
He [just] sits down in it.

He reposes in the immediate as if it were infinity—which it is.

He has made himself part of the boundless,
by easing himself into it just where it touches him.²

“He has made himself part of the boundless,
by easing himself into it just where it touches him.”

Babcock ends the poem saying
that that is religion, and that the duck has it.

I love this poem.

And I love the image of the little duck at one with the water,
riding the waves with confidence and calm
as they churn around him.

He is a reminder to me that though the challenges of change are a fact,
how we respond to them is always a choice.

So, let us learn to be more like that little duck,
reposing “in the immediate as if it were infinity,”
resting in the boundlessness of all that is sacred in this world,
truly practicing our religion in the here and now,
and knowing that this present moment is—for us—
our precious part of eternity.

So may it be.

So may it be for us all.

Amen.

² “The Little Duck.”