I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (Isa 43:19 NRS)

"This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water,
but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."  (Act 1:4-5 NRS)

There is much written about, prayed about, argued about, and thought about when it comes to
the future of the church – on any level. Individual congregations as well as entire denominations
are wrestling with changing cultural and ecclesial landscapes and looking for a metaphorical
roadmap by which to navigate into a place
of thriving.

There is no shortage of web sites, books,
articles, or workshops on how to “fix” or transform the church. Many of these cite
transformational leadership as key to a transformed and re-formed church.

It is true that leadership can be key to transformation. But we often forget that transformation is
change by another name, and while transformation can be exciting, change is fraught with
anxiety. For leadership to be truly transformational, leaders must be able to faithfully lead
through change, for it is only by “straining forward to what lies ahead” (Phil 3.13) that
congregations can arrive at the new thing of God’s work.  (Isa 43.19)

Resources for church leaders leading through change are easy to find. If you Google “resources
for pastors,” you can find all sorts of things, including articles warning you that “Skinny Jeans
and a Tattoo Don’t Make You a Leader.” Thank goodness. But many of these articles are like
one titled “Five Items for a New Pastor’s to Do List.” Here is the very helpful advice:

Let the church know what’s important to you.
Identify the leaders in your church.
Spend time with your leaders.
Visit every member of your church.
Spend time learning the church.
The article expands these items, but they sound as if they were taken from an article titled “Five Items for a New CEO’s To Do List.” Nothing on that list indicates that leadership of a church has anything to do with grace, gratitude, redemption, or worship. And this article is not an anomaly. Many pastoral self-help sites, books, and articles borrow heavily from the business world. But surely there must be more.

I have more questions on this than I have answers. But I believe the place we find ourselves today is not unique. The church was birthed outside the mainstream of cultural norms, and from the beginning struggled to faithfully navigate and speak to a changing world. There has never been a time when the church should feel comfortable or safe. Yet comfort and safety is often what we seek as congregations, as denominations, as individuals.

The reality is that God’s “new thing” means change, change brings anxiety, and anxiety brings out the worst in people and congregations. Most of us learn that to manage anxiety you decrease and diffuse it. When we work to decrease or diffuse anxiety related to change the result is often abandoning change for comfort. For the church, this is problematic. Greg Jones and Kevin Armstrong call this “mediocrity masquerading as faithfulness.”

Dave Rohrer, in his exploration of the role of pastors, *The Sacred Wilderness of Pastoral Ministry*, says that once congregations and their leaders give in to the need or desire for comfort over change, a pastor becomes a parson rather than a prophet. There is comfort in the message of the prophet, yet it is not usually comfortable. “The comfort the prophet is called to bring people is the news of God’s coming,” says Rohrer. The coming of God is heralded by the crooked made straight, valleys raised up, mountains leveled. That sounds good until the demolition work starts.

How can pastoral leaders and congregations move past complacency and avoid drifting into mediocrity and instead move toward new things?

Norman Mclean’s *A River Runs Through It* uses the river as a metaphor for the steadfastness of God’s grace and presence, portraying a sacramental relationship with the ever-moving water that serves as a lens for seeing God and ourselves. We can be surrounded, sustained, and taught by the river; love and be loved by the river. There is both holy privilege and holy responsibility in our access to the river.

And so it is for a pastor and a congregation.

The relationship between pastoral leader and congregation is unique among professionals. In addition to the normal interviewing and negotiation process that goes along with any professional hiring situation, there is the expectation that each party in the process is in a spiritual discernment process in addition to professional discernment.

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Once the pastor is called and installed, the relationship becomes multi-layered, with shifting boundaries and expectations. Just as the pilot of a boat plying the river must learn to “read” the river and understand the complexities of navigation, a pastor must be equally attentive as a congregation navigates from safety and comfort toward the transformation of God’s new thing.

The captain of a towboat pushing barges up and down the river is responsible for cargo and crew, and the challenge of that responsibility is affected by the number of barges, size of the boat, and the conditions of the river. Every trip up and down the river is different. The river is constantly changing, and navigating that change requires a combination of respect and love that always understands what is at stake. There is power and potential in the moving waters.

The privilege and responsibility of the captain is immense and a safe journey requires the captain to pay close attention to the river and its changing nature. A pastor’s relationship to a congregation has sacred privilege and responsibility, and navigating the rivers of transformation to new things and places requires a willingness to be attentive to changing conditions with respect and love.

An experienced captain knows that rising rivers are very different from falling rivers. That a river can be at its most unpredictable just before it leaves its banks and floods the bottomlands. That drift in the middle of the river is a clue to the condition and speed of the river. That to negotiate around a curve in the river, you often must head toward the riverbank rather than away from it. And, perhaps most importantly, the captain must trust and rely on the crew to keep the boat and barges shipshape and provide critical information to aid in navigation.

River pilots’ training includes “situation awareness,” and it is this awareness that helps the captain to navigate the power and potential of the river. For example, drift in the middle of the river means the river is rising, while drift nearer the bank indicates a falling river. Drift is a situation clue that has bearing on the performance of a boat’s steering and handling. Yet drift is also a potential danger that can foul the propellers and leave a boat incapacitated and at the mercy of unpredictable currents. It is helpful in making steering decisions, yet very dangerous to the steering mechanism.

Knowledge of the river allows the captain to watch for shallows and eddies that can affect and disrupt a journey. Some of these obstacles require avoidance; others require adjustments to steering or engines. There are tools to help a captain make decisions: radars, river charts, searchlights, and crewmembers relaying information. But these tools are useless unless the captain is aware of the current situation.

Pastoral leaders also need situation awareness. Congregations, like rivers, are ever-moving and ever-changing. There are often clues that provide information about particular situations; these clues can be helpful navigation aids or disguise dangers capable of stopping progress or growth. There are many tools – and helpful articles – available to leaders. A pastor’s attention to the holy privilege and responsibility of leadership can make these tools truly helpful in charting a course through changing situations toward new things.
The good news of transformation is this: that the new thing God promises us does not come without a method of getting to the new places. God promises a river through the wilderness; Jesus promised the disciples gathered in the Upper Room that the Spirit would come – and they suddenly were able to see and navigate the way forward. Like the ever moving waters of baptism, the flowing spirit provides a navigable way through change, loss, conflict – all the demolition work necessary to arrive at new places and new things.

Norman Mclean, in the wonderful last paragraphs of *A River Runs Through It*, reminds us that “eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it.” Faithful navigation of transformation – and leading through transformation – may require us to be, as Norman Mclean, haunted by – and navigate through – waters.

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1. “The River’s Flow” speaks of pastors and congregations. How does a session as a whole engage in the congregational leadership and life pictured in this paper?

“But we often forget that transformation is change by another name, and while transformation can be exciting, change is fraught with anxiety.” (p. 1)

2. Is transformation different than change? In what ways?

3. How does it change your sense of “transformation” when you think of it as change? How does it change your sense of “change” when you think of it as transformation?

4. “The relationship between pastoral leader and congregation is unique among professionals.” (p. 2) What makes the relationship unique? What things are the same as with other professionals?

5. What is, and is not, helpful about using language from the business world to talk about pastoral leadership? How does attention to grace, gratitude, redemption, and worship make church leadership different than leadership in other kinds of organizations?

6. How is the life of your congregation like the picture of a towboat and its crew directing barges on a river? How is the life of your congregation unlike that picture?

7. “Every trip up and down the river is different. The river is always changing, . . .” Change in congregations often seems either non-existent, or very slow. And yet congregations too are always changing. How can congregational leaders see slower-moving change and respond?

8. How can reflecting on baptism help us understand the comparison between a congregation and a towboat with its barges? Are congregations afloat on the waters of baptism? If so, how? If not, why not?