

Transitions: They're Not Always Easy

Hespeler, May 19, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Day of Pentecost, Baptism

[Ezekiel 37:1-14](#), Psalm 104:24-34, 35b, Acts 2:1-21, John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

We as a congregation and I as a minister have been given the honour this morning to join with Frances' family to celebrate her baptism. I am always amazed at how we are given this wonderful privilege to enter into one of the most significant moments in a family's life with them.

But there is also something that makes it particularly special for us today. This is part of our ongoing journey with her family. We also had the opportunity, just a few years ago, to celebrate the baptism of her older sister and then, a few years before that, her older brother. But, even more interesting, each of those special events not only gave us a reason to celebrate but also helped us to come to terms with something important – the often-frightening pace of change that we have been living with over the last few years.

An Apocalyptic Fire

Frances' brother came to us just as his family resettled here in Cambridge from Fort McMurray in Alberta. And they had left that place just as a terrifying wildfire destroyed huge parts of that city. Do you remember how we all felt about that fire at that time? It was unprecedented. It was apocalyptic! We had never seen anything quite like it before and we certainly hoped that we'd never see the likes of it again.

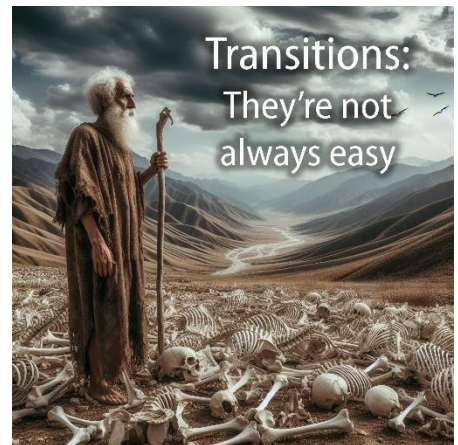
I think we probably have come to see that fire in a bit of a different light today, though, haven't we? It is no less frightening, and we have no less sympathy for those who were caught in its path, but for some reason we don't quite see it as unusual anymore.

Especially after last summer (and I doubt that the coming summer will be any better) we recognize that the Fort Mac fire was apocalyptic alright, but not so much as a singular event as a harbinger of the kind of disaster that is increasingly become a new normal for life in this country. In fact, this very week Fort McMurray has once again been evacuated in the face of just as large a fire. I am very thankful that we had that opportunity given to us by Frances' brother to reflect on where we can find God when the world is falling apart all around us.

A Pandemic

By the time that Frances' sister came along, the world had changed yet again. She was born into the confusion and isolation of the pandemic. And, when she first arrived, we didn't even know how to practice baptism because, despite some creative internet posts, I wasn't about to do it with a squirt gun. So, she waited.

And when we were finally able to carry out the baptism somewhat later, it was another opportunity to reflect on how much things had changed for the church especially throughout this disrupting experience of the pandemic. And I was grateful that she gave us that wonderful opportunity to talk about how God is with us through such disruption.



A Big Move

And now Frances has come to us today. And somehow, I am not surprised that she comes to us at a moment of great change. It is a personal change for her family, but also symbolic of a change in our society that we need to grapple with. Her family is about to make a big move back to Fort McMurray. It is a change that is a positive and promising one for them in many ways. There is a great new job opportunity that can work well for their family.

But it also shows up some of the challenges that families are facing right now because one of the motivating factors is the realization that they could probably never afford the kind of housing in this area that would be ideal for raising their family, which I think we all recognize is not an uncommon problem for young families these days.

Making Transitions

I've been thinking a lot about changes as we navigate so many of them. Change is a part of life. Sometimes we choose it, sometimes it is forced upon us, but no one can really escape it. But while change is something external, something that happens to us, there is also an internal process that goes along with that that we do not always pay enough attention to. Let's call that process transition. And transitions can often take longer and can be much more difficult than a simple change of circumstances might seem. Sometimes a bad transition can have the power to derail a positive change when it is not handled well.

Think of it this way. Once this family has packed up, traveled to Fort McMurray, moved into a new house, started jobs and registered for schools and all the things that go with that, we can say that things have changed for them.

How We Navigate Transitions

But think of all the transitions – both psychological and social – that they will have to go through to get there. This new thing will start with many endings – winding up things here, saying goodbye to friends and family who will continue to be in their lives, but not quite in the same ways. Transitions always start with endings.

After that comes a long period of great uncertainty. You are in a new place, and you must learn to do all kinds of things differently now. You figure out how to get around. You make new connections and habits. There is a lot of trial and error, some good experiences and bad. It's a great time of innovation which can be both scary and exciting. It can also be the time when you are most tempted to give up on the new thing.

And it is only after you have navigated all of that that you can fully embrace where you now are. That's why the transition can take a lot longer than just change. And you cannot make a good change if you don't manage to make a good transition as well.

Our Transitions

I mention all of this, of course, because we want to pray for Frances' family and do all that we can to help them to have a good transition. But I also think that this is all very timely for us as a church.

We are changing. We must change because this church, like most churches these days, can't just keep doing what it has always done. But if we want that change in our situation to lead us to a better place, we will need to do a great job of making a transition.

What Ezekiel Lived Through

The Prophet Ezekiel was living through a time of great change. During his lifetime he saw the collapse of his homeland, the Kingdom of Judah, and was taken away into exile in Babylon. This was not a change that he was happy about at all. But he still had to live through it. He still had to make the transition. And the passage that we read today is all about a vision that God sent to Ezekiel to help him through his transition.

Ezekiel was wandering around one day outside the city when he came upon a valley. As he looked at that valley, he saw that it was full of bones. I imagine that it was a valley where some battle had been fought in previous years. The bones were all that were left of the soldiers who had been slaughtered on that day.

But for Ezekiel, that valley suddenly became the symbol of everything that he had lost. He had lost his homeland. What had once been the strength of the people of Judah had been reduced to nothing but dead, dry bones.

In the Valley

And I think it was there – in that valley – that the depths of what he had lost finally hit him. The question that came to his mind was this, **“Mortal, can these bones live?”** And he knew it was a divine question.

But as he considered all the devastation and loss he had experienced, the answer to that question seemed obvious. No way! Everything that he had known, everything that was familiar or comfortable had been reduced to dead, dry bones. What hope of life could there be? But he didn't dare answer a straightforward no, so he only answered, **“O Lord God, you know.”**

And that is what transitions can feel like. Especially those initial phases of letting go and saying goodbye can feel like nothing but a valley full of dead, dry bones and you can wonder if anything will ever feel alive again. But here is what we need to learn from Ezekiel's vision. God brought him to that valley for a reason.

A Prophecy

Once Ezekiel had been brought to the lowest of the low and had had to admit to himself that he didn't even know if there was any hope of life left, something amazing happened. He was challenged to prophesy. **“Prophecy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.”** And that is exactly what we need sometimes. We need a word that can penetrate through to us from somewhere outside and help us to see a way through the difficulties of transition.

And so it is that, only once Ezekiel has been able to find and speak that word of the LORD, that he can begin to see his way towards the new future that God has prepared for him. And he sees that very explicitly in the bones that come back together, the bodies being rebuilt before his visioning eyes, and then finally and crucially the Holy Spirit comes and fills them. And Ezekiel can see that, yes, there is life on the other side of this difficult transition when we learn to place our trust in God.

An Experiment

We, like Frances' family, are going through a time of transition. We have been recognizing over the last while that, if we want to be a strong congregation, we can't just keep on doing things as we have always done them. And so, it is time for us to plunge into that transition. Recognizing that we're living in

an age when our churches really can't afford to just go it alone anymore, we are going ahead with this experiment over the summer. We will worship together with four other churches and do it in various places during those summer months.

This, to be very clear, is an experiment. Everything will go back to how it was when the summer ends. But at the same time, we do hope that we learn some things over these months about how we can work together and support one another. We hope that that will help us to think about change that will create a strong Presbyterian Church ministry in this area for a long time to come.

Exploring the Transition

But, as I said, we are not really changing anything, so what is the point of doing it? Well, I would say that what we are doing is that we are exploring the experience of transition in a safe environment. This is an opportunity for all of us to work through our own sense of how we have to transition for the future that we will be dealing with. What are the things that we might lose and how do we feel about that? And, yes, there might be some negative feelings that we will have to grapple with as we think about transitions into the future. There may be things that feel like valleys full of dry bones.

But the wonderful thing about what we are doing is that this is absolutely not about what we're losing. It's about starting to find our way towards a different future. Part of that, certainly, will be practically doing things like meeting our fellow Christians and finding our ways to the places where they worship. That's a moment of discovery and, even if there is some confusion along the way, there's always something exciting about that.

Innovation

But the best thing about transitions is that they are a great time for innovation. We're going to get to be creative over the summer. Having more clergy and other leaders present, will give us a chance to try new things and have a lot of fun doing it. This is not going to be a summer of just managing to survive while school is off and people are away on vacation, we are going to allow God's Holy Spirit to inspire us and lead us in some very interesting directions. Not all of them are going to work out, sure, but we are going to have a good time trying them.

Ezekiel had to go down into the valley of bones. He had to experience some sense of loss and disappointment that some things were never going to be quite the same again. But please remember that God did not leave Ezekiel down in that valley. God sent him a vision of new life and of an animating Spirit that would lead to exciting new things. That is what I pray for us and for Frances and her family.