

The Holy Gift of Transition

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Psalm 138

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The only constant in life is change. Everything is temporary. Life is a transition. Sound familiar? Starting in 2013 I heard these, and phrases like them, a lot. In January of that year, Rev. Mike Youngblood announced his upcoming retirement in June. This congregation began a transitional journey; a journey, which, with the beginning of Rev. Michael Kirby's ministry comes to a welcome end. It was a challenging, long journey that to many outside the Presbyterian world (and some within it!) seemed unnecessarily lengthy. In March of 2013, when the white smoke rose out of the Sistine Chapel signaling to the world that Pope Francis had been elected-- just one day after the papal conclave gathered to make this decision—I heard many ask, why can't Presbyterians choose a new pastor in a similar way? Why do we have to take so long?

At moments, I too wondered if our process of calling a pastor was overly complex and lengthy. But we continued our journey, and now as I reflect on it, I believe the transition time offered us a holy gift.

I want to take a moment to remind us of the myriad changes that have happened within our community in the last two years. Smaller transitions within this time of Pastoral change that the congregation has undergone that have contributed to where we find ourselves now. We've said goodbye to many of our staff members: Senior Pastor and head of Staff Mike Youngblood, youth director Scott Simmons, Christian Education Director, Adrienne Trevathan, parish administrator Jessica Marcum and most recently Nursery School Director Lois Wall and youth music director Molly Kelly.

We have welcomed Interim Senior Pastor Anne-Marie Hislop, parish administrator Sharyn Wilson-Woods, Youth Director Nick Ralston Sunday School Superintendent Mary Kathryn, Northminster Nursery Interim Director Margie Parcell and Senior Pastor and Head of Staff Michael Kirby. In addition to our staff looking different now, our building has had a significant facelift. We've remodeled the main hallway, put in a state of the art fire curtain and replaced old wooden doors with fireproof ones. We've also added a wall of bulletin boards down in Logan Hall, making it the hub of NPC information.

Our congregation has been altered too. Through our tears we've celebrated the life eternal for five beloved members and as we've joyously vowed to nurture five newly baptized on their faith journeys. We've welcomed twenty four new members and with the leadership of the membership committee Session has culled our rolls so that those rolls more accurately reflect who we are as a community.

The only constant in life is change. Everything is temporary. Life is a transition. All that we have experienced in these past two years affirms these phrases as true. But then we hear words from today's Psalm: "I bow down towards your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and faithfulness..." Steadfast love and faithfulness.

These are attributes of our God, our God who remains the same in the midst of all the chaos of life's changes. Our God whom we call on in unique ways when our worlds are shifting out of control. Our God, with whose comfort, peace and confidence enables us to transition into the community we are called to be.

Walter Brueggemann, Hebrew Scriptures Scholar, prolific writer and Professor emeritus of the Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary has organized the Psalms (or songs) into three categories: Orientation—songs of guaranteed creation; Disorientation—songs of disarray; and New Orientation: songs of surprising new life. God's steadfast love and faithfulness is present in each of these experiences and enables one to move from one place to the next.

In many ways, we have been in a state of disorientation; last summer, during construction, our physical disarray was obvious, but also more subtle. We were a community in a state of displacement, as we wondered who we were and where we were going. But in this displacement God remained firmly placed, and led us to move within this place of disarray through transformative experiences, small and large, of the Holy Spirit. I have been privileged as your associate pastor to take this journey with you and to witness this transformation. The Spirit moved slowly, as you undertook an examination of the strengths and growing edges of this body of believers, data that was collected in a comprehensive Mission Study.

Through this work the good ministry of NPC was affirmed but its weaknesses and holes were brought to light as well. Anne-Marie's leadership, guidance and gentle but firm pokes moved the congregation's leadership to begin to question NPC's identity.

At a session retreat the elders spent time trying to answer the simple but profound questions: Who are we? Why are we here? In small and large group conversations, held in the Guild Room and the office and the Sanctuary on a Saturday morning, the Spirit circled around and within the men and women gathered. As it moved it brought increased faith, conviction and confidence to the leaders, which enabled them to struggle through the questions honestly and constructively.

From these conversations reaffirmation of our mission to Grow in our Faith while being Rooted in Love was made. Affirmation that it is our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior compels us to our acts of ministry was made. Affirmation that we seek to live our lives as his disciples was made. These were the moments of excitement and energy during the transition. There were also times of low energy, when many pews were empty on Sunday morning, God seemed far way and the waiting seemed hard. And yet, God was present, steadfast and faithful. So too was the community, worshipping and continuing the necessary and good work of the church. I witnessed many of you answer God's call to leadership and service, some of you for the second or third time.

The Holy Spirit empowered this body of believers to move through its disorientation. In this time; a time of weakness and uncertainty, this congregation became stronger and more assured of its identity.

The Holy Gift of transition is that we relied on this constancy of our Creator in unique and substantive ways—most obviously in trusting the call process to bring us Michael—and experienced transformation. Slowly, steadily the Spirit was moved us to a place of new

orientation. As Walter Brueggemann describes, a place in which "...the community of faith [is] surprised by grace, where there emerges in the present life a new possibility that is inexplicable neither derived nor extrapolated, but wrought by the inscrutable power and goodness of God" (1984 124).

Thanks to God's grace we are in a new place, ready now to live into God's given potential for us with Michael. Praise God!

It is no surprise that many of the Psalms of new orientation are psalms of thanksgiving. In Psalm 138, the psalmist offers God thanks for being delivered from distress. As verse three summarizes: "On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul." The psalmist's context is restoration after exile; new life after life as it was known was taken away. A very different context from ours in many ways, but one with similar feelings of disorientation and new orientation. Writing from within his new place, a place of infinite possibilities and great hope, like us, the psalmist rejoices to God for God's steadfast love:

"Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me. The Lord will fulfil his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever" (Psalm 138 7-8).

God's steadfast love. Cognitively, we know this to be true, but in times of transition we find our hearts, souls and minds relying on it; relying on God. As a community of successful, independent people such reliance is the exception to the norm. This is the holy gift of transition. We received the gift of God's steadfast love and trusted God to move us to the place of disorientation to new orientation, a journey we could not complete alone.

God remains the same as we are a changed people, reflecting God's love which we received more clearly to the world than before.

I give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and faithfulness. Thanks be to God, Amen.

Work Cited

Brueggemann, Walter .1984. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg.