

Transitions by another name

In my short time at Holy Comforter, I've been able to sense that this period of transition has felt long, difficult, cumbersome, and to some even not needed. All of those feelings, and many more, make complete sense during a prolonged period of transition. Or really during any transition.

What I think needs to be said more is that this time in transition, the confusion, the uncertainty, annoyance, anticipation, disruption, it is all hugely important. And, it's also Biblical.

I am not one who will often relay an ancient story into modern days, but in this instance I think it's both important and relevant.

When the Israelites left Egypt, where they had been enslaved for 400 years, God had them spend 40 years in the Wilderness. Geographically, this was unnecessary. Canaan was right there! They could almost see it! And instead of going directly from Egypt into Canaan, God had them spend 40 years walking in circles in the wilderness and desert.

Why?

It seems like cruel and unusual punishment to force an entire population of people, who had just spent 400+ years in captivity and forced labor¹ to then wander around nomadically for another 40 years!

The God that I have come to know isn't cruel. Unusual, yes, but not cruel.

And so this leaves me wondering why. Why did God send the Israelites on a 40 year journey?

The answer is actually remarkably simple: identity.

¹ Captivity and forced labor is a better description of what the Israelites endured than what is commonly associated with slavery in American. Neither were enjoyable experiences, but what the Israelites endured paled in comparison to what happened in American slavery.

The Israelites had just spent 400 years in slavery. They'd spent 400 years with their identity being tied up to that of their captives. They'd spent 400 years being told what and who they were. They'd spent 400 years in an abusive relationship, which consumed, and dictated, every aspect of who they are, what they did, where they did it, and who lived and died.

In short, the Israelites had no idea who they were.

The 40 years was important because the time forced the Israelites to deal with what it meant to be slaves, and then to find their own identity.

We can see this process happening in the words of the Exodus story.

When the Israelites first left Egypt, they were excited at the possibility of freedom. But almost immediately, that excitement turned to grumbling. To gossip. To expressing fears.

Things like, we always had food in Egypt, and water, and the fear of the Egyptian army chasing them.

So God, through Moses, protected the fleeing Israelites. God gave them food, and water. Their basic needs were met.

But the grumbling continued, into more spiritual areas. Wanting to worship God in the ways they did before, when the influence of the Egyptian gods were prevalent. That led to a complicated exchange between God and Moses, and Moses and the people. But ultimately, everyone came to understand one another.

Then there were leadership struggles. Power struggles. Different factions were created from within the people – some for good and with God's blessing, and some for human interests in the interest of doing things the way people were familiar with.

Ultimately, it took 40 years, two generations of people, to be ready to enter into the Promise Land.

It took 40 years, two generations, for the Israelites to shed the identity and mentality of slaves.

It took 40 years, two generations, for the Israelites to figure out who they were; to find their identities.

It took 40 years, two generations, for the Israelites to learn how to live into and embrace that identity.

It took 40 years, two generations, for the Israelites to be ready to enter into the Promise Land.

The Promise Land is of course where the adventure begins. But we'll get to that later. For now, I'd like to talk about the lessons learned in the Wilderness.

Have you ever heard the saying that it's not the destination that matters, but the journey to get there?

The Israelites were on a journey, where truly, what was learned in that journey is what they needed to know, about themselves, and about forming a community together.

In order to be ready, they had to deal with their expectations, they had to deal with the pain and trauma of their past, and they had to be patient while the process happened, because it couldn't be rushed.

A number of different people have expressed their frustrations at the length of this transition period. And every time, I think of the Israelites in the Wilderness.

This time in transition is so important! This is the time when you all, as a community and congregation, get to determine who you are! You get to figure out your identity. You get to know yourselves in a new light.

It's scary, and confusing. And so very important.

The waiting, the patience, may seem unbearable, and even unnecessary. But both are vital.

Conflict emerges in this time of transition. Conflict that had existed under the surface, and conflict directly related to the changes (and the expectation of changes).

There's a struggle between the ways things have always been done, and how we as a community want to do things. But it is within that struggle that the truth of who we are as a community will emerge.

Israel, the name Jacob is given in Genesis, means to stride or wrestle with. The Israelites stride or wrestle with God. It is in their very DNA.

It is in ours as well.

Striding with God, just keeping up with God, is not easy. But if we let this experience break us down, we are left with the very fundamentals of who we are.

It is those fundamentals that allow us as a community to find the next Rector, who matches us and who we match. So that we can stride and grow together.

But we can't just jump into the next rector relationship. If we do, the expectations generally are that the new rector will be just like the old; that things won't change. The conflicts will remain unaddressed. Any hurt or pain related to the last rector and his leaving, those things will pollute the relationship with the new rector.

God knew this would happen with the Israelites as they left the Wilderness. And God, through the Bishops, knew the same would be true here as well (as it is in every community replacing a long term and well liked rector).

I mentioned a while back about entering into the Promise Land. And I'd like to talk about that now.

Because the Promise Land isn't just a destination, it's the beginning of the next journey.

The land flowing with Milk and Honey, wasn't exactly easy going.

There were already people there. The land itself had to be tamed. Crops had to be planted. Livestock had to adjust to their new land. Houses had to be built. Lives had to be developed.

The Israelites had to learn how to combine their identity with the realities of life in the Promise Land.

And it was not easy.

And I hate to say this, but it won't be easy when the new rector arrives either.

There will be initial excitement and relief. But eventually reality will set in, and the real work will begin.

Things will be different under the new rector. And that's okay. Those differences may be good or striking, disorienting or exciting, minute or revolutionary.

And you all as a community will be learning how to allow your new found identity as a community to work with the realities of the new rector, just as the Israelites had to do with the realities of living in the Promise Land.

I know this process has seemed long, difficult, maybe even pointless. But there is a point!

As we near the end of the transition period, let us as a community appreciate how far we've come, and embrace what we have discovered ourselves as a community to be.

Then, we will be ready to open our hearts, and beloved community, to the changes in store. The changes that only God knows.

May our hearts and minds be open and embracing of this transition. And may we all rest in the comfort and knowledge that God is guiding our journey.