

Continued from *The Epistle*, “Don’t Just Do Something, Stand There!”

You too are here at St. Paul’s. Fr. Larry retired and left St. Paul’s the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. You had parties, said farewell to a Rector whom it is clear was loved here. But he determined that it was time to retire from paid ministry. He is still a priest but no longer your Rector. He moved away, leaving his home of ten years. You are officially as a congregation in transition with an Interim Rector, who will be here for just a year or so. While I do not want to compare any priest to Christ, your next Rector to the Holy Comforter, the Holy Spirit, perhaps we call all learn and reflect this Sunday on the Spirituality of being in between.

First of all, it is important to note that this is not an empty time, not an idle time, not pointless. These times in between are not nothing. In fact, in the Bible, much of the action of the Bible happens at times in between. Abraham and Sarah received the promise of founding a great people, but they spent most of their lives, childless, wandering in a promised land not their own.

The Children of Israel sojourned in Egypt, then wandered in the wilderness for 40 long years before entering the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. The great prophets made their greatest proclamations while in exile in Babylon. The disciples spent most of their time with Jesus, wandering from town to town, wondering who Jesus really is. Jesus spent Holy Saturday in the tomb. The disciples waited in the Upper Room for the promised Holy Spirit. Our fundamental conditions as Christians is living between the “already” of God’s reign and the “not yet” of it. In fact, as God’s people look back, these in between times, times of waiting, of wandering, of exile,

were often remembered later as the times when God was most present--but only in retrospect. Indeed, one of the fundamental spiritual practices, one of the Ten Commandments for goodness sake, one that is most neglected by Americans, and Episcopalians, is keeping sabbath, a weekly time of rest and inactivity, a transition in between weeks.

Biologically, the same is true. We go insane if we do not sleep. Lack of sufficient sleep, health professionals tells us, is a root cause of many problems. The very cells of our body rest before dividing. And women know very well pregnancy is an in between time, waiting amid profound changes, biologically, psychologically and spiritually.

In between, transitions, waiting, watching, resting, wandering and wondering, these times are not nothing, but they are spiritually pregnant. Nevertheless, most of us do not want to linger here. Our natural human tendency is to rush through transitions as quickly as possible.

One secular writer has developed a model of transition that can be helpful. His name is William Bridges. His work has been used in organizations and corporations, but like much of this writing, it is stolen spirituality. Nevertheless, I like his model. His key insight is that a transition is not just an ending, followed by a new beginning. In between endings and beginnings is a transition period. He called it, the neutral zone. Between an ending and a beginning, there is this neutral period that is experienced with ambiguous feelings, of both anxiety and excitement, of resistance and anticipation, and frustration and also creativity and innovation.

Our human tendency is to avoid this neutral zone at all costs. There are two strategies for this avoidance. On the one hand, we can hold onto the past, clinging to a time that has gone away. On the other, we can rush on immediately to the new beginning. Bridges' work however says that staying in this neutral zone for a while is what makes for a good

transition. This ambiguous time allows us to see the past with a richer understanding. We have to hear others' views of our past, not just a nostalgia for good times, but a thick description of good and bad together. If we linger in the neutral zone, we can emerge with the only kind of history worth having and using-- namely a rich, nuanced view of our past, open to varying points of view. The ambiguity of the neutral zone also allows multiple new ideas to bubble up. The longer we stay in the neutral zone, the less likely we are to take the first, easy, shallow beginning, the less likely we are to settle for dull normal, and instead find a creative, innovative, new path forward.

Here is the key to the neutral zone, be quiet, be still, listen. Now Bridges' theory of transition is secular, but it does coincide in a powerful way with these stories from Scripture about sabbath, waiting, wandering, wondering, exile, and the upper room. This past Sunday between Ascension and Pentecost is a great spiritual image for where we, both you the people of St. Paul's, and also for Jen and myself in our transition. We are still, quiet, listening; God is active; but God's voice is not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but according to Elijah, God's voice is still and small, whispering to us. Will we hear it?

How many of you have said this or had it said to you: “Don’t just stand there, do something!” A wise person once told me, don’t just do something, stand there! (It is also the title of a good book.) Another wise person I know once quoted Psalm 46:10 to me like this:

*Be still and know that I am God. Be still and know that I am.*

*Be still and know.*

*Be still.*

*Be.*

During transition, try praying this prayer. As human beings, we all hate the transition time, the neutral zone. We want to rush out of it, into a false past or a simplistic future. But without doubt, from all the stories of Scripture, it is a faithful place to stand, to listen, to be. It is the purest place of faith, when we can realize and accept that any control we ever thought we had, was always mostly an illusion, and that a simply reliance on God and responding to God’s grace, is all we ever had or ever will have.

Transition, the neutral zone, is hard because we don’t know. Our future is uncertain. Even our past looks new to us. We want to act, to do, to speak, but we are bidden to wait, to be still. If we can stand it however, we might just find that it is not our speaking or acting that really matters. It is God knowing us, God loving us, God blessing us alone that matters.

In this interim period here at St. Paul’s, will you join me in this transition, neutral zone between the Already of God’s Kingdom and the Not Yet of its breaking in? As Christians, we are always between the world as it is, and the way we know it should be. Old things

are always passing away, and behold, all things are being made new. We are dying, and see we are also alive.

God has a new promise and a new direction for us. But right now, don’t just do something, stand there. Actively wait, actively listen, be still on purpose. Be will all your heart. We may just remember this time, looking back, when we knew God better than ever, because we resting in God’s knowledge, love and care for us more than ever.