

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church
Rio Rancho, NM

October 13, 2024
Rev. Frank Yates

EVERYONE HAS A STORY

Acts 22: 1-16

We meet Paul here at a crucial turning point in his life. Just minutes before he was a free man worshipping God in the Temple. Then he is falsely accused of bringing Trophimus the Ephesian, a Gentile, into the Court of the Jews-a capital offense. When pandemonium breaks out, Paul is on the verge of being stoned. But he is rescued by the Roman soldiers who take him into custody. In truth, he will never again be a free man.

Then the suspect shackled in chains asks the Roman tribune a question. The soldier, surprised that his prisoner speaks Greek, grants Paul permission to address the crowd that just tried to kill him. A truly astonishing scene, the transition from Paul the missionary to Paul the prisoner.

Then Paul speaks to the angry mob in Hebrew and tells them his story. This is truly a hostile audience, but Paul has something amazing to share with his fellow Jews. It is the story of his transformation from a violent opponent of the church into a follower of the risen Christ. You all know this story well, perhaps the most famous conversion story of all time. Outside Damascus on his way to imprison Christian converts, the risen Christ confronts Paul with this burning question, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” The

blinded Saul is led into Damascus to the house of Ananias, where he receives his sight again and is baptized into Christ. And the rest, as they say, is history. Paul the convert will travel the Mediterranean world proclaiming the Good News of the risen Christ to Jews and Gentiles alike.

His audience will listen to his story until Paul mentions that Christ sent him to Gentiles. That is a bridge too far for his hearers and that is when the Roman soldiers whisk him away. Then Paul plays the only card he has available. Paul tells the soldiers he is a Roman citizen so he is spared the usual flogging. The rest of Acts reveals what happened next to Paul: two years imprisonment in Caesarea, a perilous adventure on the high seas, and finally house arrest in Rome. Tradition says that eventually Paul was martyred under Nero. And that is the rest of the story.

Now everyone has a story. The Jewish tradition suggested that God created the human family simply because God loves stories. “Once upon a time” is music to God’s ears. As Jimmy Buffett said in his song “He Went to Paris”: “Some of it’s tragic, some of it’s magic, but I ‘ve had a good life all the way.” And so it was with Paul. And so it has been for you and for me.

My story begins in the piney woods of East Texas during the Jim Crow Era in our nation’s history. That means that blacks and whites were on the opposite sides of the tracks in every sense of that word. Except for the fact that many of us, myself included, were raised by African American women, who cooked and cleaned our houses. Both my parents

worked, my dad an electrical engineer and my mom a high school business teacher. My older brother Steve and sister Kay, like me, were raised by our maids Ruby and Mary. If you have seen the movie “The Help” you have seen my story.

We belonged to a fundamentalist church and said our prayers in public school until Madalyn Murray O’Hair ended that. By the way, in the 1970’s I met her in her nondescript headquarters in Austin. Madalyn was positively evangelistic about her atheism and gave me some brochures, which I have somewhere. But back to Tyler, my hometown.

All the stereotypes about the 1950’s and early 60’s I experienced in my town of some 60,000 people. Friends, sports, school. But especially the fundamentalist religion of my youth. Now I also had a sojourn in the Baptist Church because of my girlfriend. There I had my first taste of heart felt religion, emotional music and powerful evangelistic preaching. I know what it is like to quake in your boots with the fires of hell licking up from below.

But that world pretty much disappeared in the summer of 1966 when I graduated from high school. My parents were going through a divorce so they sent me to Europe where my brother and sister were stationed in the military. I had a backpack, a Eurail pass, and a map of Europe. For three months I wandered hither and yon seeing things and hearing things I had not encountered behind the Piney Woods Curtain, as we called it.

I was confronted by racism. I was confronted with radically different political ideas. Remember this was during

the Viet Nam Era. And radically different religious ideas. Seeing the Vatican was truly eye opening. My cousin, a religious journalist, invited me to join him at the World Council of Churches meeting on Church and Society in Geneva. (You should Google that someday.) It was my first encounter with Liberation Theology. I heard Christian leaders from the Third World calling for independence from their European colonizers. To say that my jaw dropped would be an understatement. Let's just say I returned from Europe for college a changed person. And I haven't been the same since.

Time does not permit me to tell you all my journey. There was college and then two years working in the state schools of Texas with disabled people. Then to Austin for seminary and becoming a Presbyterian in my twenties, a decision I have never regretted. If you ask me how I became a Presbyterian, the short answer is that the wonderful people at Austin Seminary loved me into the faith.

That led to five years of youth ministry, thirteen years of campus ministry at three different universities, and many years as a pastor. And now ten years as an interim and parish associate. For 42 years I have taught part time in different colleges and universities. I believe I have a dual calling to the church and the academy. I still lecture in the Oasis program, UNM Continuing Education, and St. Norbert College.

And for 39 years I have been married to Sharon the love of my life and we are blessed with four grown boys. My

journey of faith fills me with a sense of deep gratitude and a deep commitment to the life of the church and to the academy. By the grace of God, that fire still burns in my heart. God's tender mercy has followed me all the days of my life, through the thick and the thin. God has been immensely good to me, a sinner saved by grace. So I am thankful for every moment of the journey.

Paul had a story. I have a story. You have a story. I can't wait to hear yours. Our story reminds us all: "Grace has led us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home." Thanks be to God, our amazing God whose love will never let us go. Amen.

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

Rev. Frank Yates

Rio Rancho, NM

October 20, 2024

TRANSITIONS

Joshua 24: 14-18

Transitions are important, so important that we often mark them in special ways. A pointed reference in our diaries or journals. An email or text or letter celebrating the moment. Really big transitions are commemorated by planting a tree or even building a monument. Sometimes we even declare a holiday marking a transition date-like July 4, 1776.

An important transition happened earlier in our nation's history on November 11, 1620. One hundred and two people had sailed on the Mayflower to establish a new colony in Virginia. But the wind and rough seas pushed them north to Plymouth Rock in what is now Massachusetts. A minor mutiny broke out on board that small ship. Some of the passengers called "Strangers" by the others insisted that the rules had changed since they were not landing in Virginia. The other passengers, called Pilgrims, were religious Separatists from the Church of England. They realized that chaos and anarchy would result if they didn't mark this transition with an agreement, some political arrangement in a land not governed by the Virginia Colony.

So together they forged what became known as the Mayflower Compact. This agreement, signed by both the religious Pilgrims and the "Strangers" who were not of their sect, set out the New World's first political compact, something they all could support. The Mayflower Compact is considered the beginning of American democracy. The landing in a New World was a momentous transition and it demanded such a compact.

And so it was when Joshua led the children of Israel into the Promised Land. After their many struggles, the twelve tribes gathered at Shechem to commemorate this momentous event-the transition from nomads in the wilderness to settlers in the Promised Land. The occasion began with Joshua's speech recalling their history and their struggle. Then Joshua challenges all the people to be faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who had guided them to that day. The people promise to serve God alone and dispose of their foreign gods.

At that point Joshua drew up statutes and ordinances that the people agreed to follow. This was probably the beginning of the Old Testament Law. Then Joshua set up a stone in the sanctuary at Shechem as a reminder of what the people had promised. Together the written laws and the stone remind the children of Israel of their binding commitments. No longer wilderness wanderers but now inhabitants of the Promised Land, by the grace of God. Their momentous transition demanded a special commemoration.

And so we come to the life of Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church, a church in transition. You have enjoyed a decade of excellent pastoral leadership. You are now in a transition period. And by the grace of God, we will get through this together. And on the other side of this journey, a newly installed pastor will have the privilege of serving you.

During every pastoral transition in the Presbyterian Church, we take this opportunity to look closely at where we are and where we hope to be. Like Joshua we need to recall our past, the many ways God has blessed you since your formation in 1986. Your many pastors from Kay Huggins to Kathy Westmoreland who have served you well. The many members who have given their time, talent and treasure to these many years. Those who have died and joined the church triumphant and those who have moved on to other places. We want to remember them and give thanks for all of them. And so we look back in gratitude.

And we also want to take a close look at where we are and where we hope to go. Like the Mayflower Compact, we need to look ahead in hope to plan our future. The Session has appointed a Mission Study Team to lead our transitional self-study. We met for the first time this Thursday and what a talented group of folks they are.

This team will ask for your input about your dreams and hopes for your congregation. They will collect data about our community and its needs, and the ways we could serve this community better. We will look at our strengths as well as the challenges facing our congregation. Like so many mainline congregations, we want to reach out to welcome new people, especially younger folks. And we want to see where we can and should grow in our ministry. A self-study is a snapshot of our congregation and our community at this point in time. It is a time to take stock and look forward in hope.

Then the Session will approve our self-study and send it on to the Presbytery's Commission on the Ministry who will hopefully sign off on it. Then the Session will take the information in the self-study to fill out our Ministry Discernment Profile, which is then sent to the General Assembly in Louisville, Kentucky. There it is posted on our denomination's website where potential ministerial candidates can read about your life together. The congregation will elect a Pastor Nominating Committee that will prayerfully consider all the candidates who express interest in our congregation. And then by the grace of God the right person will be chosen and presto, you have yourself a new pastor!

So that means your input will be vital. Your prayers will be vital. Your enthusiastic participation in this transitional process will be vital. It is your congregation and everyone in our fellowship needs to take ownership of this transitional process. We need to love one another and pray for one another and build each other up in faith, hope and love. In this transition every one of you will be needed. Everyone!

And what is my role in all this? This is the fourth time I have had the privilege of leading a congregation in a transitional period. And here is the way I see myself. Remember when that cargo ship ran into the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Maryland? I learned a new term from the news coverage: "harbor pilot". That's a specially trained pilot who guides a ship into and out of a harbor.

So they board the ship for a brief time to navigate the harbor they know well. They get the ship in and out of port safely. I have decided that a transitional pastor is something of a harbor pilot. I will only be on board with you for a short time either to get you into port or out onto the high seas. It could be argued that transitional pastors do both. Safely home with a new pastor. Or getting you sailing on the high seas with a new pastor. Your call!

So I hope to be of help as your harbor pilot on our transitional journey together. Anchored on shore or sailing the high seas. Trusting that all along the way Christ our Lord is guiding us and leading our journey. And thus I end with that wonderful hymn prayer for those upon the sometimes perilous waters of transition:

Eternal Father, strong to save, whose arm has bound the
restless wave,

Who bade the mighty ocean deep its own appointed
limits keep;
O hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea.
May it be so. Amen.

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October 27, 2024
Rev. Frank Yates

REPETITION

Job 42: 1-6, 10-17

I have been teaching a course in the UNM Continuing Education program on the 19th Century Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard. In 1843 Kierkegaard published a small novel entitled **Repetition**. It is about a young man who breaks off his engagement and then travels from Copenhagen to Berlin brooding over his decision. The young man's adventure parallels Kierkegaard's own decision to end his engagement to Regina Olsen. Why? Because he felt God had vetoed their engagement. In this autobiographical novel the young man still hopes to get his beloved back. He hopes for a repetition of their relationship. And so day after day he reads Job, the whole book, especially chapter 42. In a moment we will see if the young man had his wish fulfilled.

Job, who has lost his children, his health, his wealth and his reputation, gets it all back and double in the end. His friends and family bring him gifts and offer sympathy. He then fathers seven sons and three beautiful daughters. Plus, fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. Finally, he is given long life, dying full of days, indeed, one hundred and forty years old.

It sounds almost like a fairy tale, doesn't it? "And he lived happily ever after." After all the suffering and all the shame. After repenting of his hubris. After offering sacrifices and prayers for his friends and their hubris. Ultimately, he gets it all back and then some. A repetition of what he had, plus a lot more on top.

Now this ending to Job may sound startling, even unsettling, to you. It has been for many readers and scholars through the years. Actually, there is much that is startling throughout the whole book of Job. One theologian has suggested that we look at Job as Israel's round table discussion about the problem of human suffering. At that table are all the major characters in this book. Each of them will see human suffering from their own perspective. Let's listen to their discussion.

First, there is Satan, a member of the divine counsel, something like a cynical district attorney, an accuser. When God holds up Job as a paragon of virtue, Satan suggests that God take away his blessings to see if Job serves God "for nothing". Well, raiders and storms destroy Job's possessions and kill all his children. Then Satan is allowed to afflict Job with terrible sores from his head to his feet. Satan speaks for all those who think people are virtuous just for the perks, the blessings. And Satan represents all those who understand suffering as affliction by demonic powers, like demon possession and all the rest. This was a minority voice in Israel.

Second, there is Job's wife, who is never named. When she sees all that has happened to her husband and family, she offers a bitter response, "Job, curse God and die." Sometimes suffering drives us to despair, even to despair of life itself. Now we are not sure what happened to Job's wife. Did she stick around to the end or does Job have a new wife in chapter 42? We just don't know.

Third, we have Job's friends-Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and a Johnny come lately named Elihu. At first they are the ideal comforters. They visit Job in his loss and affliction. They weep with him, tear their robes, throw dust in the air and sit silently with their friend for seven days. Then, unfortunately, they start talking, explaining to Job why he is suffering. All of them pretty much say the same thing: "Job, you are suffering because of your secret sins. You look good on the outside, but inside you must be a sinner." The friends represent the majority view in Israel: if you suffer, it's because you sinned. Strangely enough, their orthodox view is refuted in chapter 42. Amazing.

Fourth, we have Job. A paragon of virtue-God so declares in chapter one. Righteous to the max. And yet God tests him, tests him with terrible losses and afflictions. In chapters one and two Job responds to his suffering with these noble words: "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." He also says, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not receive the bad?"

But then through thirty-three chapters he complains bitterly about his condition. He does not curse God, but he does curse the day he was born. What he wants is a hearing before God the judge of the universe to plead his innocence. This is Israel's troubled heart, asking Why? Why do the innocent suffer? When bad things happen to good people, surely we have a right to complain and lament.

Finally, there is God, a spiritual presence at the table. God presides over the divine counsel and allows Satan to afflict Job, then listens to thirty-three chapters of Job's complaints and the friend's defense. Then he speaks from the whirlwind and basically asks Job this question: "Who are you to question how I have ordered the universe? Who do you think you are?" Well, that somehow reduces Job to silence and then repentance for his hubris. Then just as suddenly as he lost everything, God restores to Job his health, his honor and then doubles his possessions, though not his dead children. New children are given to Job.

God is an elusive and mysterious presence in Job. Allowing suffering, then restoring the one who suffered so much. Indeed, the Lord gives and the Lord takes away and then gives again. The question is can we say with Job: "Blessed be the name of the Lord"? Or will we say, "Let the day perish in which I was born"? (3:1) Or shall we lament for all the thirty-three chapters in our life? Ah, the mystery of human freedom in the midst of our suffering and then the surprising twist at the end of Job's story.

Israel knew how to rejoice when marvelously unexpected things happen. When they return from Exile in Psalm 126, they cry out: “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter.” Who could imagine such a reversal! Frederich Buechner has noted that the tragic is what’s expected. The comic is what’s unexpected. And so Israel laughed with joy at her sheer good fortune.

In Mark 10 Jesus heard the anxiety of his disciples who had left everything to follow him. So Jesus promises them that they will “receive a hundredfold now in this age-houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children and fields” although he adds “with persecutions”. Plus Jesus adds, “And in the age to come eternal life.” Jesus seems to be out promising Job 42. Not just long life. But eternal life. Oh my! Is this just too good to be true?

So the question for us this morning is this: After all we may suffer in this life, is there some hope? Some hope that despite the darkness the light will shine yet again. And in our world will there be peace in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine? Will the dark clouds hovering over our nation’s political life ever clear up? Will our church find renewal and new life? And what about my own life? What can I expect for my future? Are there blessings in store for me? These are questions we cannot help but ask in our distress.

And so I end with the last word from Kierkegaard’s book **Repetition**. The young man discovers that his beloved has become engaged to another, which is in one way what he

wanted. And so he in effect thanks his beloved for freeing him to follow his own vocation. And this is what he says is the greatest repetition of all: “I am again myself. The discord in my nature is resolved. Did I not get everything doubly restored? Did I not get myself again? A spiritual repetition!”

Maybe after all our troubles we will find ourselves again in the presence of God. With less and perhaps with more. Either way, still in the hands of a God who loves us with an everlasting love. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Amen.