

River Crossing
Exodus 16:2-15, Mark 2:13-22
September 30, 2007

A 10-year old boy wrote this letter to God: “Dear God, Were you a Boy Scout? I am. Did you ever come out in the desert and play jokes on people in the Bible. I bet you did. We do all the time and have a blast.” It’s signed, “Nat the rat.”¹

In this morning’s reading from Exodus, the Israelites probably feel like God is playing a mean trick on them. They left Egypt six weeks before and now are wandering in the desert in temperatures over 100 degrees. Six weeks was longer than they could handle. Little do they know that they would be here for 40 years! They are hungry and thirsty, which makes them irritable and grouchy. They are murmuring and complaining. What a cruel joke God has played on them, bringing them out to this barren land to die of thirst, starvation and heat exhaustion. Even the manna and quail are not enough to appease them, for they remember their diet of fish, cucumbers, melons, onions, and garlic in Egypt. In the judgment of the Israelites, freedom in the desert is a poor substitute for slavery in Egypt. They are angry with God and they make their feelings known.

The Israelites are in the midst of transition. They are moving from the relative security of life in Egypt to the awesome uncertainty of life in the Promised Land. For forty years they are stuck in the desert in between Egypt and the Promised Land.

Think back to a time when you have moved to a new location or changed jobs or schools. Remember some of the anxiety you felt. Any major change involves loss, which evokes the feelings common to grief: shock, anger, disorientation, and eventually acceptance. These feelings even surface when we experience positive changes, such as graduating from school, getting a job, getting married, having a child, buying a home, remodeling a house. Life is full of change – changes in relationships, changes in our home lives, changes in health and lifestyle, changes in our employment and financial status. There are also inner changes which we experience – spiritual awakenings, deepening social and political awareness, changes in self-image or values, the discovery of a new dream or the abandonment of a former one. Life is full of changes, positive and negative, all of which cause stress in our lives.

We’ve heard lots of light bulb jokes. Have you heard this version: How many church members does it take to change a light bulb? Change?

What do you mean, change? My grandmother gave that light bulb to the church 50 years ago!

We human beings are typically resistant to change. We prefer to stay in our comfort zones. We like things to stay as they've always been. Change takes energy and we'd rather not expend ourselves in doing anything different. We're satisfied with the status quo.

William Bridges is a transitional management consultant. He helps us recognize that there are three phases to a transition experience. The first stage is an ending. The ending is followed by a period of confusion and distress. This in-between time finally leads to a new beginning.

The ending for the Israelites is liberation from slavery and leaving the land of Egypt. Freedom from oppression is a joyous ending, and yet they long to go back. Why would they want to go back, especially to a situation of slavery? It was familiar. They knew who they were there. It was not necessarily pleasant, but it was known. Endings are painful because they cause us to break connections with settings in which we have come to know ourselves. We are separated from old and familiar contexts. We are led into an identity crisis, wondering, "Who am I?" The new mother who shouted, "I'm falling apart!" was telling the truth, for the self that she had previously identified with was disintegrating. She was no longer carefree and independent because her baby was dependent upon her, which was constraining. Endings throw us into a state of disorientation, in which we feel lost, confused, shipwrecked. The psychologist Erik Erikson saw this sign over a bar in a western town: "I ain't what I ought to be, and I ain't what I'm going to be. But I ain't what I was." Endings, no matter how joyful and desired, bring on a set of losses: a loss of the familiar, a loss of identity, and a loss of orientation.

Endings throw us into a period of confusion and distress. Before new stability, new identity, and fresh orientation arise, there is an empty time. It is the fallow time of winter after the leaves have fallen and before the green buds of new life have emerged.

The Israelites in today's scripture are in this middle time. They feel in a literal "no man's land" in between the old way of life and a new way of life. It is a nothing time, a nothing place. We often think of the desert wilderness as a nothing place, barren, empty, void of life. Yet having grown up in the high desert of Nevada, I can testify to the fact that there is a rare beauty to the desert, a beauty that is often seen with time. The Israelites wandering in the wilderness are discouraged, anxious, and angry, oblivious to the hidden beauty all around them.

We'll come back to this wilderness wandering in a moment, after we complete the transition process. Transitions are completed with a new beginning. The new life of springtime follows the dead of winter. New identity, new direction, new orientation are born. The Israelites aren't there yet, but as their story continues, they find themselves in the Promised Land.

Bridges offers the image of a river crossing to describe the transition process. "It is as if we launched out from a riverside dock to cross to a landing on the opposite shore—only to discover in midstream that the landing was no longer there. And when we looked back at the other shore, we saw that the dock we left from had just broken loose and was heading downstream."²

At a certain season in my life I had a recurring dream of such a river crossing. I had once stood on a riverbank where I felt comfortable and secure. A series of storms came along that threw me off the bank into the swirling rushing river. There was nothing to hold on to. I feared I would drown. Finally a life preserver was thrown to me so that I could keep my head above water. I had to decide whether to find my way back to the shore from whence I had come or to chart the waters into the fresh territory of the other side. The lure of the familiar was strong, but I also knew there was danger there. I chose to go to the other unknown side and as I found my way across the river, the waters grew calm. My choice of the new beginning was affirmed.

The middle time in between an ending and the new beginning can feel like a turbulent time of change, chaos and uncertainty, as it was for the Israelites. American Futurist, Marilyn Ferguson, says, "It's not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it's that place in between that we fear...It's like being between trapezes. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There's nothing to hold on to."³

While the neutral zone is an unsettling time, it can also be a creative time ripe for fresh opportunities. It takes time and energy for newness to come to fruition. Transitions are not trips from one side of the street to the other. They are journeys from one identity to another, and that kind of journey takes time.

The journey Moses took the people through in the wilderness took 40 years, not because they were lost, but because the generation that had known Egypt had to die off before the Israelites could enter the Promised Land. Most transitions don't require literal deaths, but they do require the "death" of outlooks, attitudes, values, and ways of thinking that functioned in the past. Like leaves falling from trees, space has to be made for new life to

spring forth. “Moses took care of transition’s ending phase when he led his people out of Egypt, but it was the 40 years in the neutral zone wilderness that *got Egypt out of his people*.”⁴ Most transitions don’t take 40 years, but they don’t just take a few weeks either.

The neutral zone is often a time to evaluate where we’ve been and to sharpen our vision for the future. It is valuable to question the “usual” and to risk experimentation with something different. Even setbacks or failures can become entry points into new visions. Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak built their first Apple PC because they lacked the money to buy the computer-building kits that were ‘the right way’ to build a computer in those days. Yamaha turned the sagging market for grand pianos into a challenge to come up with an electronic instrument that would mimic the sound and touch of the big piano perfectly.”⁵

The waiting of an interim time can offer the opportunity to enhance a program or life or ministry. The key is in our perspective. Will we stay stuck in what has been lost or will we seize the chance to do something innovative and different? An entrepreneurial outlook is the best mindset to keep from being frightened by change. What can I make of these changed circumstances? What are the creative possibilities in this new setting? What new thing is God bringing to birth within me and among us?

As people of faith, we have the added advantage of trusting in God’s presence, a creative, life-giving presence always at work among us, if we are open to it. The wandering Israelites were supplied with manna and quail sufficient for one day at a time. In this way God taught them to live one day at a time, trusting in the providence and guidance of God. The daily food drop was a sign of God’s abiding presence with them. The people were challenged to trust in the creative power of God to bring new life out of death. Living day by day with faith helps us make it through the wilderness. People without faith are caught between positive thinking and despair. But those who live by faith trust in God’s power and deliverance. They depend upon God for their daily sustenance while in between times. That is what we mean when we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” We wait through transition day by day, trusting that God will provide nourishment for the journey.

A French army unit was isolated in the Sahara Desert during World War II. Resupplying them was terribly difficult, and they were running out of everything. Their clothes were in particularly awful shape. Somehow a Red Cross clothing shipment reached them, but most of the clothes arrived with size labels that were illegible or missing, and everyone wondered how they could be matched to the people they would most nearly fit.

The commander, obviously an expert on neutral zone strategies, simply lined the troops up and issued each man one shirt, one pair of pants, and two shoes—with no attempt to fit for size or even to match pairs. Then he shouted, “Debrouillez-vous!” which means roughly, “Sort them out.” There was a terrific scurrying and thrashing about while the men switched and swapped until they had clothes that more or less fit them. The result was a very adequate solution to an impossible problem—except for one unlucky soldier who ended up with two left shoes.⁶

Take hope, my friends, that even out of the wilderness of chaos the blessings of new life and order can emerge. Our God is always making all things new. Thanks be to God.

¹ David Heller, *Dear God: Children's Letters to God* (Doubleday, 1987).

² William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes* (Philippines: Addison-Wesley Publishing, Co., 1980), p. 4.

³ Quoted in William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2003, 2nd edition), p. 39.

⁴ Ibid, p. 43.

⁵ Ibid, p. 51.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 53-54.

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