

Transition and Trust” Pastor Fritz Wiese. Last Sermon at Epiphany Lutheran Church, Centerville, Ohio 18 July 2010
Joshua 1 and John 15

In the name of Jesus. Well, here we are in mid July and many of us are facing transition of one type or another. Our Seussical cast has shifted from practice mode to performance mode. Some students gearing up for high school; other families packing up for college. (Actually it was amazing at the Seussical dress rehearsal last week—freshman Rachel Meyer is already at Kent State for the summer, but wanted to see the show. So her parents set up the Macintosh computer with it’s built in camera in the back and she watched the whole production via skype. What an age in which we live!) Many of our congregation are still transitioning through interesting economic times, with new or under employment. Our worship life will transition through John Scheusner’s departure. As you know, the Wiese house is packing, trying to sell a house, and getting ready for relocation. Our whole congregation is less than a month away from transitioning into a new day, with the opening of our Austin Campus. Transition! (Think about personal example of transition)

If you think about it, God's people have always dealt with transition—of all sorts. Adam and Eve transition from the Garden of Eden to . . . a future outside the garden. Moses is the leader who helps Israel transition from slaves in Egypt into . . . people of the promised land. David transitions from a shepherd into . . . a king. Jesus transitions from a carpenter. . . into a hands-on discipleship director, Savior, etc. The disciples transition from fishermen and tax-collectors into . . . leaders of the church. Saul transitions from a Christian bounty-hunter to . . . key theologian and church planter.

So transition is central to the faith journey—whether your one of God's people of old or of today. Transitions are wonderful opportunities, but they can also be times of significant challenge and stress, can’t they? Experts point out that change and transition are different. Change is pretty simple. Your marital status can change in a 30 minute wedding ceremony. Your address can change in a matter of days. You can work one day and be retired the next. Pretty clean and simple. But “transition” is another animal. Transition involves the shifting of countless emotions, relationships, and values

connected with the change. I was talking over lunch with Terry Rapoch, who heads our Tanzania mission outreach, about the nature of change. We agreed that if change involves moving the big rocks of life (school, job, location), transition is stirring up all the sediment, thousands of countless connected particles. You can't do one without the other. And the sediment, all those nuanced implications of the big rock changes, can take a long time to settle down into new positions. And while it's stirred up, sometimes it can be difficult to see through.

So let's take a look today and see if God's Word offers us any guidance for all of us when we face those transition zones in life. Let me suggest the first word God offers is: "Do not be afraid." As you remember, this was the angel's message to Mary when she was learning that God would use her to bring Jesus into the world. A wonderful opportunity, but a bit scary too, right? To be asked as a young single girl to carry the messiah. I've got to admit that in the midst of saying goodbye to 14 years of wonderful relationships with the awesome folks of Epiphany, I'm a little bit afraid. Will we find friends like the ones we've enjoyed here? Will LuAnne find a job she'll enjoy? Will our kids connect with the right people and opportunities? Will our house sell?" Even though I know God's hand directs this move, as it did with Mary's, I'm a little bit nervous. I think God understands how fear can be a force.

We can be fearful of all types of things, can't we? How about this little story to illustrate?

Morris and his wife Esther went to the state fair every year. Every year, Morris would say, "Esther, I'd like to ride in that helicopter." Esther always replied, "I know Morris, but that helicopter ride is 50 dollars and 50 dollars is 50 dollars." A few years later, Esther and Morris went to the fair. Morris said, "Esther, I'm 85 years old. If I don't ride that helicopter now, I might never get another chance." Esther replied, "Morris, that helicopter is 50 dollars and \$50 dollars is 50 dollars." The pilot overheard the couple. He said, "folks, I'll make you a deal. I'll take the both of you for a ride. If you can stay quiet for the entire ride and not say a word, I won't charge you! But if you say one word, it's 50 dollars." Morris and Esther agreed -- and up they went. The pilot did all kinds of fancy maneuvers. But not a word was heard. He did his daredevil tricks over and over again, but still not a word. When they landed, the pilot turned to Morris. He said, "By

golly, I did everything I could to get you to yell out, but you didn't. I'm impressed!" Morris replied, "Well, I was going to say something when Esther fell out, but 50 dollars is 50 dollars."

We experience fears of all types, especially in transition zones. So God persistently tells his people "do not be afraid" At the birth of Jesus, at his empty tomb, amid his resurrection appearances,—each occasions of transformational transition—God tells his people, "do not be afraid!"

I like how God flips this message in our first lesson today. Moses has died and now Joshua is to lead the people into the new day into a new promised land. After 40 years of wilderness traveling, the time has finally come. It's Go time. So 3 times God tells Joshua and the people; Be strong and courageous. In the midst of transition, yes you might have a bit of fear, about \$50 of resources or a number of other issues, but remember: be strong and courageous.

For that message #1 connects with message #2: God is with us. One of the touching songs in our summer musical has a character sing: "I'm alone in the universe. So alone in the universe." Many of us have felt that way, and maybe to a deeper degree when change is afoot. But again, God understands us so well. When Jesus was ready to leave the disciples, ready to leave his earthly ministry to ascend into heaven, recall what he told his disciples. He gathered them together for the Great Commission, where he sent them to be and make disciples. And what was his very last sentence, his very last instruction? "Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the earth." You'll never be alone in the universe; even amid changes, Jesus is there with you all the time.

A couple of weeks ago, my college buddy and his son joined Luke and me for one final get together before we move. We decided to try this new Ozone, zipline course down near Fort Ancient. It was really cool to zip 7 times from one tree canopy to the other. But I tell you, the first time I stepped off that wooden platform in the great wide open, having to trust that my harness would hold, that was a bit nerve-racking! And transition can be like that faith-wise. Sometimes God needs us to step off the ledge and into the future, trusting that he will hold us.

On the 6th zip of the day, our tour guide told us, now this one is one of the longest and highest lines we'll do. 180 feet about the river, if you have a camera, this is the one to film. Well, that's all I need to hear, so I put my camera on video mode and off I go. Well in the process of videoing, I spun around a bit, which seems pretty cool at the time. But as I'm nearing the tree platform, I realize my twisting has diminished my velocity. I come within about 6 feet of the platform when I stop and start slipping back the other way. The guide tries to throw me a rope, which does nothing but rip me up with this rope-burn. Now I'm zipping in the wrong direction before I finally settle at a point, dangling 180 feet above the river. The rest of my party was laughing, but I did not think it was very funny, as I hoped the device would hold. Well, the guide made a quick rescue, no problem. And today, I wonder if that's a good illustration. Not all of life's transitions work on try #1, do they? Some transitions might take a little bit more time than we anticipated, Plan A turns into Plan B or even C and D. But through it all, remember, God will hold. God will be with you, whatever you face, whatever the call, until you see it through.

Well, let's wrap up with just one more encouraging word God provides. In the spirit of our Gospel today, "Be fruitful and multiply." Not in the sense of Adam and Eve's commission to populate the world. With over 6 billion inhabitants headed to 9 billion by 2050, I think we can check that one off in the "gotter done" column. But when we're in the midst of transition, tumbling in the air between letting go of one trapeze bar and grabbing on to the next one, let's hear the Promise of the Provider that this is an opportunity to be fruitful and multiply.

In reflecting recently on transition in my life, I realized of some significant symbols. There are places in my life that are no longer physically there. When I first came to Epiphany, I worked for 4 years in the old farm house, our offices. Torn down, no longer there. I ate soup suppers, played basketball, and laughed at Crude Arts Festivals with many of you in the old fellowship hall. Torn down, no longer there. Last week, we were with several Epiphany families up at Camp Luther, which has been battling bluff erosion. I swam in a pool and worshiped on a portion of the bluff which time since has eroded into the lake. What once was terra firma is nothing but air now. Many of you Wittenberg graduates spent some time in Firestine hall.

Third floor Firestine is where I spent my whole sophomore year. Since then, torn down, nothing but space across from the library.

Now when I think about those very special spots in my life no longer there, I can get a little melancholy. But then I remember the new fruit the transition enabled. Having rejoiced in Epiphany's old fellowship hall, now we enjoy our Celebration Center, with musicals and ministry galore. Part of the bluff at Camp Luther is gone, yes, but in the process of protecting it, a wonderful new lake access feature has just been added.

The point is that while it is appropriate to mourn the loss involved in transition, we must also delight in exploring the new song, the new challenge, the new twist, the new opportunity God surely will provide. How does the focus shift from "fear" to "fruit"? Our gospel tells us we are the branches who bear fruit because of the vine to which we are connected! In all transitions, how do we allow the Energy of the Vine to flow through us so that we will bear good fruit?

I love Epiphany because you've done that so well. Being fruitful and Multiplying God's love in so many ways. Joyfully, creatively. Every decade we've built for an ever-changing culture in transition. Mission trips and partnerships, pantry, Habitat, discipleship development, Christ Renews His Parish, Bible studies, small groups, Storybook Project, marriage mentoring, support groups, trying to welcome others, creative worship, the list goes on and on and on. I have valued serving with fruitful pastors and staff: Pastors Larry and Becca. Pastors John, Sara and Todd. Jane, Kay, Erin, Dan, Terry, Gerry, Ann, Roxie, Kim, Barb, Andy, Ken, Cindy, Shirley, Heather, and several more.

Wally Arnold and I got together last week, and this Epiphany disciple and retired bishop staff advised me, be careful not to try to say it all in your final sermon. That's good advice, because there is no way. Impossible.

As I transition with you into God's future, I realize there is no one story, no one closing joke, not even just one Bible verse to sum up my feelings, my hope, my gratitude and love for you—all of which run deep. It will be great to celebrate with you (this evening). And thanks to all of you who have already showered us with cards and emails and well wishes.

As we all go forth, facing whatever transition, large or small, God poses for us at this point. let's remember together, God's

message: 1. Be strong and courageous. 2. Jesus is with us always, equipping, forgiving, directing, re-creating. And 3. Be fruitful and multiply. Whether any of us feel separated from each other, whether it's geography or even chronology, let's remember that One Vine connects us all together, Jesus the incarnated, crucified, risen and ascended Lord. This Vine connects us together, connects the world to Jesus, so we can be fruitful and the Lord's joy may be multiplied. In Jesus' Amen

I say

Thank you

I love you,

And See you in Christ's future.

(Sing Benediction from Chicago Folk Service)