

Proper 25 C 2022 RCL
2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18; Psalm 84:1-6; Luke 18:9-14
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St. John's Sharon

Today's epistle reading is from the last letter that Paul wrote which we still have. He writes to his protégé Timothy about his upcoming death. He says: *I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*

One important element in this passage is that Paul was ready for this next phase of his existence as he moved from life in this world to a more abundant life in the nearer presence of God. Paul had many opportunities to come to terms with this change, from his intimate visitation by the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus, to the numerous times he almost died from persecution and shipwreck. The profound change he discusses, his death, hasn't even happened yet, and already he is spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically prepared for it.

Unfortunately, for most of the human race, the changes in life around us move much faster than our ability to process and handle them. I'm not necessarily talking about our own deaths here, although that is a significant change for all of us. In my experience, however, many people are more ready to deal with their own death by the time it comes than with any number of other life changes.

On the back page of your bulletin is a chart. This chart comes from William Bridges Associates and it deals with transitions. By transition, they mean our psychological, mental, emotional, and spiritual processes for dealing with change. Change often happens almost instantaneously. Our process of dealing with that change can take longer, however. The chart shows three areas, Endings, Neutral Zone, and New Beginnings. We go through these areas whenever we experience change, whether a positive change like a getting a better job or a negative one like the death of a loved one or even a neutral one like moving a phone from one side of your desk to the other. This process takes longer and is more intense for bigger changes, but all change requires a process. I've seen research that says if you move a phone from one side of your desk to the other, it can take six months before you always reach for the right part of your desk when the phone rings. We might need six months of transition for something as minor as reorganizing a desk.

The first part of a transition is endings. When something changes, we have a lot to let go of. We have old habits and elements of our lives that won't happen anymore. Maybe you can't drive your normal route to work with a new job. Maybe you won't have family dinners when the kids go to college. Maybe the house will be empty and you have to figure out how to do all sorts of things that a spouse used to do after they have died. Many of these endings result in losses, sometimes significant losses. We usually build our lives with elements that bring us joy and love and the structure to get various things that we need. When those elements are gone, life becomes more difficult for us on many levels.

As things end, we enter a space that this chart calls the Neutral Zone. The Neutral Zone is a difficult place where old things have ended but new things haven't yet become established. Time in the Neutral Zone can be sad, confusing, and difficult.

The Neutral Zone is sad because we have losses to mourn. Every loss, whether of a spouse or of a favorite pen, needs an appropriate period of mourning. We need to feel the feelings that we have, whether sadness, anger, relief, guilt or whatever comes to us. Only when we feel our feelings can we begin to heal and move forward. Sometimes that work is straightforward, like when we have to replace things that worked well for us. Sometimes that work is hard and complicated, like the deaths of loved ones. The process of working through our grief may involve a variety of activities, all of which we need to accomplish before we can move into a New Beginning.

Beyond just being sad, the Neutral Zone is confusing and difficult because our old habits and instincts don't work. If you've ever meant to drive someplace different, but you realize the car has just taken you to work, you know the kind of thing I mean. It's like going to someone else's house, and nothing is in the same drawers or cabinets, and you have to think about every step just to get breakfast. I recently saw a meme that said "Welcome to adulthood. You get mad when they rearrange the grocery store now." I sent it to my wife because when Aldi's reconfigured their store layout a few years ago, I complained to Jane for a month because it took me longer to find everything when I went shopping. This was the Neutral Zone of my shopping experience, a relatively small part of my life, and yet it was sad and frustrating and difficult for me.

Once we have done the work in the Neutral Zone, we can move into New Beginnings. When we have mourned our losses, we are ready to welcome new people and new experiences into our lives again. When we have broken our old habits, we are prepared to develop new ones. When we stop trying to find a way back to the things in life that have ended, we are able to move into things that are ready to begin. When we stop looking for apples in the old aisle, we can get them where they are now. If we don't do the work in the Neutral Zone, however, we can never really transition into our New Beginnings.

I bring all this up, because at this moment we are very much stuck in the Neutral Zone in many areas of life, and I believe that recognizing where we are and how difficult it is will help us when it is time to move into New Beginnings.

I don't think I need to go into a lot of detail about the variety of endings that have occurred since the beginning of 2020. The changes in every aspect of life have been enormous. How we work. How we go to school. How we shop. How we obtain medical care, and what that care is. How we do church, both Sunday morning and in all the other aspects of our parish life. How we see our loved ones. How we travel or take vacations. Additionally, and maybe most notably, many people have died over the past two years, both from COVID and from other factors, and those losses are significant in many of our individual lives and in the life of our congregation.

While some try to declare the pandemic over and begin what is sometimes called "the new normal", the reality is that dealing with all these changes takes time, especially when there are so

many changes affecting so many people. We also find that too often as we try to step out of the Neutral Zone with some new beginning, we get pulled back.

Take an example like buying basic necessities. After supply chain nightmares when many staples were unavailable for a while, we thought things had stabilized. Now inflation has hit and the war in Ukraine is causing spikes in the global prices of energy and food. We will still need to wait some time before we figure out what things will cost and what we can afford on a regular basis in the future.

Or, to take a more church-based example, Ron and I and others spent a good 18 months during the height of the pandemic figuring out how to do worship services, and had to change almost everything about every two months. Three years ago, Christmas services were on-line. Two years ago, we were able to do a Christmas Eve service in the parking lot. Last year, we had services at different times than before COVID, but still needed to keep the services small, short, and socially distanced. This year, we are doing something else again. Given the fact that Christmas is Sunday and we are still rebuilding our choir and our children's programming, we are going to do one large Christmas eve service and two Sunday morning Christmas services. Next year, we will do something different again that I hope will be closer to what will happen in future years. Yet that is four years in the Christmas Neutral Zone. It's a long time there, and there are elements that are sad and difficult, but it is where we are. All kinds of other ministries and aspects of life are in similar places.

The good news, however, is that God works miracles in the Neutral Zone. The Biblical words for the Neutral Zone are the wilderness or the desert. We see a lot of places in scripture where people are out in the wilderness and amazing things happen.

Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness before he begins his public ministry. This time helps him let go of his old life, probably as a builder, then begin the new elements of his life of preaching, teaching, and healing that God is calling him into. The Israelites spend forty years in the desert, wandering through the Neutral Zone. They have to mourn the losses of the cosmopolitan life of Egypt and give up all the habits they learned as slaves if they are going to become the people God made them to be. They had to let go of a lot. Then they had to learn entire new ways of being. Only in the Neutral Zone of the wilderness were they confused enough and lost enough and to be open to receiving the Ten Commandments and the rest of the law. Only after all of that work was done could they go into the promised land with a hope of living as God wanted them to live. Paul's blindness after his Damascus encounter with Jesus is another example of a time when he had to deal with losing much of who he was in order to begin a life as an apostle of Jesus.

I don't claim to know all that God has in mind for us as individuals, as a church, as a nation, or as a world during our time in this current Wilderness. I also really hope it doesn't take forty years. What I do know is that we can come out of this time more holy, righteous and godly individuals and communities if we do the work God is giving us to do.

The first assignment we have in this Wilderness time is to look for God. God is showing up and he is working. We will be more likely to recognize where he is if we are taking the time to say

our prayers and read our Bibles, but God can manifest his love and presence to us regardless of our preparation. During this time of confusion and lack of structure, we have the amazing opportunity to reorient ourselves toward those places where we find God. Then we can come out of this time with habits and structures that orient us in the direction that God wants us to go.

The second assignment is to take the time to mourn our losses. Our losses are real, and if we aren't willing to feel the emptiness in our life now and give thanks for the gifts that were given to us before, we aren't going to be able to move forward. Until we have processed the past, we can't move into the future.

Third, we may need to help others mourn their losses, as well. Everyone around us is dealing with difficult losses and often with various traumas. We need to reach out with understanding and patience, especially when it feels like nothing is working and we are frustrated and inconvenienced. Part of the gift of this time may be the love we share and develop as we help one another through our difficulties.

Finally, we need to remember that we are in the Neutral Zone of the Wilderness. Now is not the time to double down on solving every problem or try single-handedly to restore normalcy. Now is the time to be gentle and gracious with ourselves and with others. We are told to love our neighbor as ourselves, and at this point both ourselves and our neighbors need a lot of love.

We seem stuck in a place with too many Endings and too few New Beginnings. It's difficult and sad and sometimes scary. But God is present and God is most certainly at work. As we seek God and love ourselves and our neighbors, we will be ready for the incredible New Beginnings God has in store for us in God's very good time.