

May 16th, 2021
The Ascension of Our Lord
Year B
Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24: 44-53
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The Times They are a Changin'

Stephanie had been going to an in-home day care since she was 10 weeks old. She loved it there, as did we.

It was owned by a husband/wife team who cared for the children, and their mother who, when she wasn't in Italy for the summer, would spend time some time with the children and make a 'Nana Pie' that everyone there loved. Stephanie made some good friend and learned some important life skills. It was a loving and nurturing environment, and we couldn't have asked for anything more for the first few years of her life. But it was time for a change.

It was time for Stephanie to go to preschool.

I did a lot of research, received a lot of brochures in the mail, and met with a lot of directors. I decided that Next Generation Children's Center in Walpole would be where Stephanie should go.

We told Stephanie of this pending change in her life but, as toddlers do, she remained blissfully unaware.

One day, just before she was going to start at Next Generation, I arrived at her daycare early to pick her up. She was confused why I was there so early, and I told her we were going to go see her new school.

She was not impressed.

She had been playing with her friends and didn't want to leave and came with me ever so reluctantly. I got her situated in her car seat and we started to drive to Next Generation. As we drove, I told her about her new school and what sort of fun things and activities she would do but she continued to be unimpressed.

She liked things the way they were. She did not want to leave what had been familiar to her and she certainly didn't see any reason to start something new and, as a 3 ½ year old does, she let it be known that she was not happy about this. And then, I comforted her, and I eased her mind in a most unexpected way.

It took four simple words: "the building is yellow".

Surprisingly, that was the trick, yellow was her favorite color and knowing that color would be around her proved to be a source of great comfort and it immediately put her mind at rest that what was coming would be OK.

Change happens all the time and throughout the Bible we hear stories of transition and of change.

Probably the most well-known is the story of the Exodus. The story of the Israelites who were slaves to the Egyptians. The Bible tells us that their lives were made bitter with hard service and that the Egyptians were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them (Exodus 1:14).

And then Moses was pulled from his comfort zone and called by God to set his people free. Moses came to Egypt and implored Pharaoh to let the people go. God's omnipotence was demonstrated to Pharaoh time after time, plague after plague yet Pharaoh refused to let the people go. Finally, after the 10th plague, Pharaoh relented and set the people free.

The Israelites had to leave immediately, and they scurried to get everything that they needed together as fast as they could and leave the land of Egypt before Pharaoh changed his mind.

The journey from Egypt to the land that God had promised was hard and scary.

They were following an unknown path and faced many unknown perils along the way. Perhaps they were missing some things from their time in Egypt yet were glad to leave many other things behind. Perhaps they worried about what was coming and how things would change for them. Throughout their journey God stayed with them and through Moses' leadership they were led through the unknown times.

For 40 years they lived this nomadic life and the old ways were mostly forgotten. For most of them the nomadic life was all they ever knew.

As the Promised Land loomed closer Moses came before them and told them that, at 120 years of age, his time had come to an end and that Joshua would be leading them across the Jordan and into the Promised Land.

Then God commissions Joshua saying:

“Be strong and bold, for you shall bring the Israelites into the land that I promised them; I will be with you.” (Deuteronomy 31:23).

I can only imagine what the Israelites were thinking.

They were finally going to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land, but they did not know what that would bring. They did not know what from their current way of life would carry forward nor what they would lose. They did not know where would they live, how would they spend their days, whether their jobs and roles would remain the same? What was going to change and what would stay the same? How would the worship of God change and evolve from their nomadic life?

Perhaps some of them wanted things to stay the way they were. Perhaps they had grown accustomed to this lifestyle, perhaps they kept these thoughts in private or perhaps they shared them with others. But no matter what they were thinking, the new norm was coming and God was with them and had equipped Joshua to care for them. The spirit of knowledge now rested with Joshua.

About 1100 years later we hear the story of Elijah who became a prophet during the reign of King Ahab.

During that time many of the Israelites had come to worship Baal and to abandon the Lord's commands. In fact, the worship of Baal was highly encouraged by the King and his wife Jezebel.

During this time of idol worship God empowered Elijah to remind the people that God was the one true God and that they were God's people.

Elijah challenged King Ahab and the priests of Baal to meet him on Mt Carmel so that the priests could show how powerful their god was.

In that challenge Elijah told the priests to call on Baal to light a fire. The priests gathered their wood and then prayed and cried out to Baal beseeching him to light a fire and prove how powerful he was; but that wood never got lit.

It was now Elijah's turn and he had 4 large jugs of water poured on his makeshift altar and wood pile and, after praying to God, the fire was miraculously lit.

The people were amazed and realized that God was the Lord and they turned away from Baal, so that they could follow God's commands and live as God's people.

They left Baal behind quickly and rightly, but I suspect some, despite knowing that God was the one true God, were worried about how the changes that were coming would affect their way of life, and the way of worship to which they had grown accustomed.

Jezebel was not happy about this turn of events and she pursued Elijah around the country.

Despite these ongoing threats from Jezebel and King Ahab, Elijah continued to teach the people about God's commands and God's path, show God's omnipotence, and sought to end the worship of Baal and other idols.

The people respected Elijah and followed him as they learned this new way of life, but things were going to change soon.

The prophets saw it coming and knew that it was the day that Elijah would be taken into heaven.

They even approached Elisha telling him "*today the Lord would take his master away*" to which Elisha replied, seemingly in denial, "*Yes, I know be silent*" (2 Kings 2:3).

I can only imagine what Elisha was thinking at the concept that soon he would become the spiritual leader of the Israelites. I suspect he was somewhat excited at the idea but that he also wondered how he would do that and thought that he really didn't want to take on a new role and new responsibility and that he wanted things to stay as they were. Perhaps he even felt that God was going

to abandon him and so he begs Elijah that he might inherit a double share of his spirit.

I imagine that the Israelites, as they watched Elijah depart on a chariot of fire were also concerned and worried as to what the future would bring. They had only recently abandoned their idols and now their spiritual leader, the one who was helping them to understand their God, the one had teaching them to follow a new and different path was leaving. I think that, while they were overjoyed to see Elijah taken into heaven on a chariot of fire that they wondered and worried what would happen. How would they know the right path? What would change and what would remain the same?

I suspect many grumbled to one another about this change and I suspect that many felt that God had abandoned them.

But God did not abandon them, God was with them and God provided them for them by equipping Elisha to become their spiritual leader. After crossing the Jordan

The company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, 'The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.' (2 Kings 2:15)

1000 more years pass, and we now see the Jews living in an occupied state under Roman law.

They were not being treated justly and were dismayed at the events that transpired around them. And then Jesus comes and teaches them about the Kingdom of God. Jesus teaches them the law and commandments and teaches them to love and care for all people.

Jesus was their friend and their rabbi and their Messiah. They had learned much from him and they wanted to remain with him always.

But Jesus was killed and taken away from them.

This frightened them and they worried what would come.

But the unexpected happened -- Jesus was resurrected, and he returned to them.

They were overjoyed and, I suspect, thought that many things would repair as they were before Jesus had been taken away.

Over the next 40 days Jesus appeared to them several times, performing miracles and continued to speak to them about the Kingdom of God.

He took them to the Mount of Olives he left them again and ascended into the heavens.

I can't help but wonder what they thought at that moment.

Luke tells us that they were filled with joy, but I imagine that were also were a little concerned and worried about the changes that were coming.

They had just reminded of the commission that had Jesus had first proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount which was

To be Christ's witness in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8b)

But how would they do this? Did they have the ability? What perils would they face? How would they know the right path? What would they miss from their old days and what would they carry forward in this new direction?

Perhaps they only kept these worries to themselves thinking that they should be happy and not worried and also for fear that they were alone in thinking this way.

But as Jesus ascended into heaven, he promised them that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit comes. With those words Jesus provided them with comfort that they would be equipped to do as God willed and that God would be with them.

Today, 2000 years later we too are facing a period of change and transition.

Like the Israelites in the story of Exodus our lives were turned upside down and everything we knew changed overnight. Offices were shut down. Schools, restaurants, stores, and countless other things were closed. Borders were closed. Household goods were hoarded.

I'm grateful that we've not had 40 years of this but I am also surprised that in just 14 months we have grown accustomed to so many changes and all the things that we've grown to like as well as things that we don't.

Putting on a mask when we leave the house, standing at a distance from each other, worshipping and going to work in our pajamas, celebrating holidays, birthdays, graduations with car parades and Zoom calls. Having time to do projects and learn new skills or hobbies. For many of the children in our community this way of life is all that they have ever known or all that they remember with any clarity.

Living during this time of Covid has come with a lot of pitfalls but, it was safe, and it was predictable, and it allowed the emergence of differing thoughts and opinions and ways to do things that previously were just "this is how it is done and how it has always been done". These new ways of doing things became normal.

Now, as the virus loses its grip on our world things are starting to change again.

We are moving towards a new norm and we don't know what that will look like.

Things probably won't be the same as they were before Covid but how will they look?

Last March when everything changed overnight, we only had time to react and quickly make plans. Now we have time to think about what will come and consider what the next weeks, months, and years will bring.

We wonder what will emerge as we break forth into the new norm.

We are joyful and sing praises to God that soon we are emerging from the world of Covid but perhaps we also approach this change with a sense of loss, sadness, anxiety, trepidation.

No matter where our thoughts take us the reality is that change is hard, no matter how much we want it or how much we are looking forward to what is on the other side, change is hard.

Approaching the unknown is not easy. It is hard to be thrust into it unexpectedly and without preparedness but it also just as hard, perhaps harder, to move forward into a new and somewhat different world than that which is being left behind.

As we move into something different, we may feel scared, sad, abandoned, happy, alone, nervous, excited, anxious, joyful or any one of many different emotions.

But when we are in that state of transition God remains with us and reminds us that we are provided for, we are not forgotten, and we are loved.

God was with the Israelites as they approached the Promised Land and comforted them as they worried about what new things the Promised Land would bring.

God was with the Israelites and comforted them when they worried about Elijah's departure and how they would continue down paths in different ways.

God was with the disciples comforting them. Like Joshua and Elisha they were promised that they would be equipped with the power of the Holy Spirit. And the appearance of two men in white, perhaps Moses and Elijah, God comforts them and reminds them that God was, is, and will be with them.

With the same assuring words spoken to the disciples that they will *be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5)* and *will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them (Acts 1:8)* God comforts us.

God has always comforted God's people and we are God's people. God always provides for us and watches over us and during times of change and times of uncertainty of what is coming we can be comforted in knowing that God is there.

God is with us, Emmanuel, and God is always there to guide us through paths untrodden, through perils unknown with a love that supports us. The Lord your God is with you now, and always.

Thanks be to God!

Alleluia

