

TRANSITIONS
FROM EARTH TO HEAVEN
MAY 21, 2023
ASCENSION SUNDAY

A baby is born.

There is joy and excitement.
 Then there is a new routine to work out,
 extra requirements and complication to life.
 It is challenging.

A couple gets married.

There is joy and excitement.
 There are also adjustments to be made,
 who does what around the house,
 differences of opinion to be worked through,
 figuring out how to do day-to-day life together.

The job promotion came through.

There is joy and excitement.
 There is also the challenge of learning the new job.
 The first few weeks are a time of uncertainty.
 Who are my coworkers?
 What am I supposed to be doing?
 Am I performing up to expectations?

Life is filled with transitions:

graduation, moving to a new city, a divorce, retirement,
 the death of a loved one, serious illness or injury, getting fired.

Transitions can be difficult, even painful.

They require making adjustments to the changed situation.
 Sometimes we don't want to make those adjustments.
 We were comfortable with the way things were,
 and so we resist.

They also provide an opportunity for *something new* to come into being.
 Sometimes it is *surprisingly good*.

And we wonder why we resisted.

Some transitions are unexpected and rather unique,

and there's really no way to prepare for them.

Like when the followers of Jesus had to transition from life with him walking and talking with them
 to life without his presence.

They'd had a tragic taste of that when he was crucified.

One day he was with them,
 teaching about the kingdom,
 sharing the Passover meal with them.

The next day he was dead and buried.

What a traumatic transition for them!

And a few days later another transition:

Easter!

He was alive again, transformed, and spending time with them once again!

For days and weeks the risen Christ spent time with them,
 continuing his teaching, sharing meals with them, doing life together.

And then...

Another transition.

LUKE 24:44-49

A transition back to life without his presence.

But this time it was not traumatic, not tragic.

But it *was a transition*, nonetheless.

Now they would learn how to live without him being right there with them.

He gave them some instructions for life in the time ahead.

First, he enabled them to see that all of this,

the crucifixion and resurrection,

had been part of God's plan from ages ago.

This was not some fluke event.

It was part of God's plan.

And though Jesus would no longer be with them,

God was still in charge.

And now there was work to be done, a message to get out:

repentance, forgiveness of sins,

calling for a *specific response* to the good news of Jesus,

crucified and risen.

And that needs to go to all nations.

Not just Jews.

Not just people like us.

But to *all the nations*.

"Nations" was like a code word indicating those unclean Gentiles!

The word has to get out.

Starting in Jerusalem,

here in your own neighborhood,

to the neighbors across the street

and the guy working in the next cubicle,

but going outward from there, and to all the nations.

There are no boundaries beyond which you do not go.

ALL nations.

To people who are different from us.

Different races, different income levels, different cultures,

different levels of education, different nationalities,

different political parties.

Including those that seem the most unlikely and unlikeable.

Russia, North Korea, Afghanistan, China, Iran,

and all the rest.

The gospel must go to them *all*.

And guess what?

YOU will be my witnesses.

YOU will tell the story...

to those unclean Gentiles.

This is Luke's version of the Great Commission.

It wasn't the Great Suggestion.

It was the Great Commission, a commandment.

It was not optional,

not something to hand off to the pastor or a church committee.

Before ascending to heaven,

Jesus gave all of his followers a job to do.

This would not be a transition from following Jesus

to a return to their old way of life.

This was Jesus saying:

When I'm no longer with you,
 the good news goes forward!
 The ministry goes on!
 And you are the ones to carry it forward!

But... Pause for just a bit.

Don't jump straight into it.
 Wait for the Holy Spirit to come upon you.
 This is a job you cannot do on your own.
 But with the Holy Spirit,
 with God present with you,
 all things are possible.

Then...

LUKE 24:50-53

What was that like?

Did he float up into the air?
 Did he fade into another dimension?
 We don't know.
 There is no detailing of the event in the Bible.

All we know for sure is that

they found themselves standing there with Jesus no longer in their midst.

But nowhere do we find in them any expression of grief or sorrow.

Nowhere do we find any of them leaving the group because of his absence.

Because this time was entirely different from when he'd been executed.

He'd been taken up into heaven.

He was taken up, body, soul and spirit.

Divinity had come to earth and taken on humanity.

Now humanity had been taken up into heaven.

Jesus became a two-way bridge between heaven and earth.

In Romans 8 it says that Jesus intercedes for us.

Imagine that: God praying for you!

And their response?

They worshiped him.

They worshiped him.

To a Jew, to worship anything other than the one true God
 was the worst sort of blasphemy, worthy of death by stoning.

But they worshiped Jesus.

And he accepted their worship.

It is an explicit acknowledgement of the divinity of Jesus.

It's the acknowledgement of his first followers and

the acknowledgement of Luke, the first century author of the third Gospel.

Belief in the divinity of Jesus was not a later invention of the church.

From the beginning of the church they saw that

he was somehow both fully human and fully divine.

They worshiped,

and they waited for the Holy Spirit.

Because there was more to be done.

There was a *world full* of people created in the image of God,

and they needed to hear the good news about Jesus.

So they waited for the Holy Spirit to come and empower them,

the *same* Holy Spirit that *we* have.

Because we have the *same work* to do.

It was quite a significant transition they experienced.

And *Northwest Hills* is dealing with transitions.

I've been the pastor here for 37 years,
 and we've gone through a number of significant transitions during that time:
 shifts in the way we do ministry, building projects,
 financial overabundance and times when we had be frugal,
 members coming and going, staff changes,
 from traditional style worship to contemporary *and* traditional, and now blended,
 transitioning to online worship and now in-person *and* online,
 numerical growth *and* decline,
 moving from the United Methodist Church to the Global Methodist Church.

Every one of those shifts has presented us with very real challenges.

And Northwest Hills has navigated every one of those transitions.

Now I'm retiring at the end of June,

and there will be a *new pastor* at the helm, Robert Barnes.

And you'll navigate this transition, too.

Because the work of ministry goes on.

There are still many people yet to be reached with the gospel.

And not only in faraway lands,

but right here in our own neighborhood.

And *you* are the church that God has in *this* place, in *this time*,

called empowered by the Holy Spirit to do that work.

I won't be the one preaching or teaching.

I won't be playing trumpet in the praise band.

I won't be doing your weddings or funerals.

I won't be at the meetings of the Administrative Council

or dropping in on the Prime Time lunch.

I won't be answering the church phone or found in the church office.

I won't be at the hospital before your surgery.

I will not be here.

But Northwest Hills will still be here,

because the Holy Spirit will still be here with you,

and work of ministry will go on.

Let me push the pause button for a moment.

I want to be very clear that I am *not* likening myself to Jesus.

If you know me at all,

you know *that* would be a joke.

And I am not likening his ascension to my retirement.

Hardly.

But, after 37 years with the same pastor, this is a real transition for the church.

For a few of you, it might be difficult.

(For some, it might be cause for celebration!)

Either way, it is a real transition.

And if we look back on the transition Jesus' first friends experienced way back when,

we might learn something about how to deal with *this* transition.

Northwest Hills can show spiritual health by *the way you handle* the transition.

Nothing would bless me more than

seeing Northwest Hills flourish in new ways in the years to come.

Because the church is not me.

The family of faith is not defined by me.

The work of God is not dependent on me.

What can you do?

Lean into the transition.

Welcome a new pastor with open arms and high hopes.
Be open to how a different pastor might lead the church.
 Don't say, "That's not the way Pastor David did it."
 A different pastor will bring different gifts and graces to the task.
 Be open to what new and exciting things God may have in store for you.
 Be open to a new movement of the Holy Spirit,
 to do things in *new ways*,
 to do *new things*,
 to reach *new people* for Christ.
 Because, *no matter who* the pastor is,
 the work of ministry goes on,
 and the Holy Spirit is here to empower you to do it,
 so God will be glorified.

The new guy showed up early for the meeting.
 There were introductions all around.
 The new guy wondered if he's be able to *remember* all those names.
 They didn't know him,
 and he didn't know them,
 so everyone was rather reserved, careful, cautious.
 Slowly they moved into talking about the newest projects,
 the challenges they were dealing with,
 listening carefully to each other,
 no one committing themselves to a particular perspective yet.
 They were still feeling their way.
 Except for one woman at the table.
 She'd been sitting quietly off to the side with tears in her eyes,
 and one or two occasionally running down her cheeks.
 The new guy guessed she was grieving the absence of her friend,
 who no longer worked there.
 The new guy was his replacement.
 He wondered what she must think of him.
 He wondered if she'd resent him.
 She hadn't said a word through the entire meeting.
 He wondered if she even heard any of the conversation.
 He wondered if this was going to be a problem.
 That was me at my first administrative board meeting here at Northwest Hills.
 Over time she and her husband became good friends of mine,
 and faithful servants of Jesus here at Northwest Hills for a number of years.
 And though they moved away years ago,
 we're still friends.
 And brothers and sisters in Christ.

Every transition is painful in its own way.
 But every transition creates an opening for God to do
 something new, something different, something wonderful.
 So while we wait for the next transition, let's take a note from Jesus' first followers.
 They stayed "continually at the temple, praising God."
 So let's praise God!