

“A Life in Transition”

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives...When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying...They all joined together constantly in prayer (Acts 1:12-14).

Times of transition create some of life's most difficult and challenging experiences. For graduates, once diplomas have been handed out and caps have been tossed, the jarring reality of starting over in a new school or finding that first job carries with it a fresh set of concerns and uncertainties. For those of you who are getting married this summer, along with the celebration and wedding gifts will also come a whole new set of challenges as you and your spouse begin the journey of joining your lives into one. In recent months, some of you have experienced the burden of transition as you've welcomed a new baby into your home and others in our midst have had to adjust to the silence and loneliness that the loss of a loved one has brought into their lives. Each of these experiences reflects the doubt and discomfort and discord that transition brings; each one of these scenarios has the potential to turn our lives upside down; and, as we try to reorient ourselves to new situations like these, these times of transition can create feelings of fear and anxiety like nothing else.

As we consider today's text from Acts 1, this is exactly the situation in which the disciples find themselves. In the verses that lead up to today's text we find the account of Jesus' Ascension. Beginning in verse 9, Luke tells us that Jesus "was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight." Then, Luke writes, "They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.'" It's here that the words of today's text begin as we learn that the disciples return to Jerusalem and retreat to an upper room. Now, we're not given too many details about the frame of mind or the activities of Christ's followers in the period between the Ascension and the day of Pentecost, but we can be sure that this was a transition in life that brought many of the same emotions that were just mentioned.

For one thing, the disciples must have had some sense of frustration. As they had stood with Jesus on the Mount of Olives just prior to His Ascension, they asked Him if He was now going to reinstate Israel to a place of power in the world and their misguided question was met with a mild rebuke as Jesus declared in verse 7 that it was not their business to know the times that the Father had set. So it was clear that their hopes that Jesus was going to restore the nation of Israel as a world power were not going to be realized. Things weren't turning out the way they had hoped and this unmet expectation must have been very confusing to the disciples.

Next, they were forced to wait. Waiting is difficult enough when you are doing it alone, but it's even more trying when you are forced to wait with others. We've all experienced this kind of waiting whether it's being stuck in traffic or waiting on the tarmac in a crowded airplane, the impatience of others can intensify our own irritation. Jesus had told them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised. They weren't about to abandon Christ's command, but this time of waiting must have been unbearable.

Then, on top of their unmet frustration and impatience, this experience also brought a transition of leadership. Jesus was gone. He had ascended into heaven. For three amazing years Jesus had been their guide; the one who had led their Bible studies; the one who had preached their sermons; the one who had offered a fresh understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures. He had told them what to do and, for the most part, they had followed His lead. And now, He was gone! The uncertainty that His Ascension left with the believers must have been overwhelming and, as we consider this intense transition in the lives of Christ's followers, what Luke writes next make a lot of sense. In verse 14, we are told that this group of frustrated, confused and desperate disciples "joined together constantly in prayer."

It's important for us to understand this point. In midst of a transition as difficult as any we can imagine and with the Jewish leaders who had orchestrated the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus right outside their door, these believers and witnesses of the Risen Christ gathered and were united in prayer. And please understand this: The constant prayer in which they engaged was almost certainly centered on God's Word.

In today's Gospel reading from John 17, as Jesus prayed to the Father, He said, "I have given them your word...Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." And around the truth of Scripture which Jesus had unpacked for them, and fulfilled for them in His death and resurrection, and to which He had pointed them throughout His ministry, these followers gathered in prayer. They prayed first by listening to the Word and then, as they read and marked and meditated on the things God had revealed in Scripture, God provided guidance as Peter rose to lead this earliest church of about 120 people in choosing Matthias to replace the Judas as an apostle.

There are dozens of questions that this reading raises; questions about Judas; questions about their selection process for choosing his replacement; questions even about the reasons behind the need for a replacement apostle. But in the midst of all of these questions we find these frustrated and desperate disciples gathered around the Word in prayer. And, in this difficult time of transition, God provides! Led by the Holy Spirit, Matthias is chosen to succeed Judas, the witness of the Apostles is strengthened and in a matter of days, Peter's proclamation of the Gospel on Pentecost would be used by the Holy Spirit to create an explosion of faith as 3,000 would join the Church through the miracle of the Word and Baptism. Through His Word, God provides for and guides these early disciples. And through His Word God does the same things for us as well!

Let's face it! This life is nothing but transition and the devil would like nothing more than to see us desperate and disoriented and looking to ourselves and our sinful hearts for direction. That's exactly what Judas did and we see the same results of this sinful, self-seeking strategy every day in our own broken lives and in the shattered lives of those around us. But my friends, even though we have looked away from God in our attempts to cover up and cope with our sin, God continues to speak to us! He will not be silent! He will not turn away! And He will bring us the rescue He has promised!

In God's Word, Christ convicts us of our sin. In God's Word, Christ forgives us of our sin. And in God's Word, Christ guides us by His truth! My friends, make no mistake, we live in a time of transition. This life is not our final destination and this world is not the one we were made for! In II Corinthians Paul writes, "Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (II Corinthians 5:1-5). This world is not our home and God loves us too much to allow us to remain comfortable in this counterfeit existence. Brothers and sisters, we are all experiencing a life in transition and the truth and promise of this reading is that even in the midst of our frustration and impatience and anxiety, God will continue to provide a way for His people.

That's exactly why we read this text about Matthias, because you see, when Matthias is chosen to replace Judas, we learn this one simple but profound truth: The ministry of Jesus will continue! In this text, we learn that our Lord will not leave his Bride to fend for herself against the powers of darkness; Christ will not stand by in silence. Jesus told His disciples, "The one who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16) and as the Church continues to proclaim Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sin and Christ risen for the eternal life of all believers, the Kingdom of God lives and grows and we are given the strength for this life in transition. My friends: Rejoice in the promises of God and join together constantly in prayer because God has called you to be witnesses to the resurrection and through your faithful witness, the risen Christ still speaks!

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