

Luke 4, Transitions, Lent 1, 2019

Someone mentioned to me the other day that I hadn't talked much about the weather lately in my sermons, so here goes. (Paul von Goertz, this is on you!) As you likely know, meteorological spring began on March 1. And we can sure tell, right? Not so much! And the official first day of spring is the spring equinox, on March 20, this year. So, no worries.....mother nature still has 10 whole days to turn things around for us! Actually, when it comes to this time of year, I've appreciated a term coined by one of the Duluth New Tribune's former writers, Larry Weber: "sprinter". He calls this time of year "sprinter," because it's so much a transition time between winter and spring. Every now and then, we get a burst of warmth, and you start to feel spring pulsing in your veins. And then the next storm comes or the next wind chill warning happens, and you feel as though winter will never end. We're in transition, we're in sprinter. And it's awkward! Transitions can be very awkward places in which to be, when things are not quite one thing nor yet another, and it's confusing and sometimes hope inducing and sometimes discouraging. The upside to our season of sprinter, our winter to spring transition, is that it situates us ideally to relate to lessons for today, both of feature transitions. Because in our Old Testament lesson, an entire people face a life changing transition, and in our Gospel lesson, Jesus faces a life changing transition. Both lessons involve that awkward time of changing from what has been to something new that is to come. And since transitions are so much a part of our lives, as well, I think we ought to look into this a bit more closely, don't you?

Indulge me for a moment, as I talk about the transition currently happening in the Berge household. As many of you likely know, my husband, Phil, has officially announced his retirement from full time ministry at Grace Lutheran in Hermantown as of the end of August, this coming summer. He will turn 65 on August 27, and he is ready to be done with long term, full time ministry. As an aside, let me just mention that I am MUCH younger than my husband, by 6 years, and have absolutely no plans to retire anytime in the near future. (So don't panic or get your hopes up, whichever it would have been—He's retiring. I'm not.) Well, as many of you know, retirement is a major transition. He can't wait to be free of some of his work's demands and is so looking forward to having discretionary time to fish when the weather is good for fishing, to do home and yard projects, and so on. But, he's also terrified; he's been a pastor for 30-some years. Who will he be when he's not a working pastor? And what about the change in our financial status that this will bring? Sure, it's one thing to make plans on paper, but he feels considerable anxiety about how finances will actually work out. And it's not just a transition for him; it's a transition for me, too. I look forward to having my husband around much more, and I wonder what it will be like to have my husband around a lot more. He's been the full time pastor, primary wage earner, and I the half time pastor; now I'll be the main financial provider and he'll be the Pastor's husband. See what I'm saying? It's a transition. It's exciting and scary and unsettling. It may be great, it may be difficult, it's almost certain to be awkward and unsettling. All of us face such transitions fairly regularly. Things like: retirement, getting a new job, moving, having children or having an empty nest, becoming grand parents, getting married, losing a spouse, undergoing medical treatment. And it is easy to give into temptation at just such a time and to feel anxious and doubtful. Because my contention, which I think we discover in

these Scriptures, is that times of transition make us particularly vulnerable to exactly such temptations as anxiety and doubt.

Let's look at our first lesson from Deuteronomy, a lesson we don't have very often. This lesson is presented as Moses passing along instructions from God to the Hebrew people, prior to their entrance into the promised land. As you recall, the Hebrew people had been enslaved by the Egyptians for years and years, and then God led them out of slavery into freedom, through the event of the Exodus. That was a huge transition. They left behind the burden of enforced labor but also the lack of responsibility that came from having no power of their own. Once they were free, they didn't necessarily handle that transition into responsibility all that well, if you recall. They created a Golden Calf to worship, they complained about the food and the accommodations, and they actually ended up living as a nomadic desert people for 40 years. God provided manna and quail for them, and they moved from place to place for a generation or two, before they stood poised to enter Canaan. Another transition! Because that entrance meant that their period of life as nomadic desert people was now at an end; they would be settled, working the land and raising crops. No more wandering. And also, no more manna and quail falling from heaven. But rather, responsibility, stability, and they need to work for their living. That's a very different lifestyle! Moses urges them to enter the land, settle in it, harvest, and give back to the Lord from the bounty of their harvest. He also teaches them a kind of creed, a little like our Apostle's Creed, and this creed in Deuteronomy is considered by many scholars to be the earliest creed in Scripture: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to

the Lord, the God of our ancestors; the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” So, Moses does two things as these people transition into a wholly new lifestyle; he teaches them a creed that recalls their history with God, and he instructs them to give thanks for the bounty of the Lord within their new context. Why does God inspire Moses to do this? Isn’t it likely because God knows full well that when we are in transition, we have a tendency to become anxious and grasping? Anxious, in that we tend to forget how God has supported us in the past, and then fail to trust God to lead us in our new future? Grasping, because in our insecurity we tend to hang fearfully on to what we have, rather than to give thanks and give back to God or others in need. Such a transition is the precise time when we need a creed to remember how God has provided for us in the past, and an encouragement to trust in God’s provision in the future and give thanks. Transitions are a time of vulnerability to the temptations to forget God’s goodness and to exchange trust in God for an anxious and grasping nature.

We see a similar dynamic in our gospel lesson from Luke, the story of the Temptations. The difference being that rather than a whole people experiencing a dramatic shift in life style, here it is just one person: Jesus. It might be helpful, as we are moving through the Gospel of Luke this year, to get a little perspective on the story line of the Gospel. Because, just last Sunday, on Transfiguration, we had the Transfiguration text from chapter 8 of Luke. But, we’re now returning back in Scriptural narrative and time to Luke 4, to accommodate the First Sunday in Lent, when we always meet up with Jesus and the devil in the dessert wilderness. So, it might

help if you could forget for just a moment that in these last weeks we have seen Jesus do all kinds of ministry: he has turned water into wine, preached his first sermon in his home synagogue, performed numerous healings, taught large crowds of people, prompted a miraculous and huge catch of fish, called disciples, and been transfigured on a mountain top in the presence of his three closest friends. But this morning, it's as if none of that had happened. Instead, go back to the Baptism of our Lord Sunday, which happened on January 13, nearly two months ago. That adult baptism Jesus experienced preceded all the things I just suggested you forget. In fact, up to *that* point in Luke, we had just read about Jesus' birth. Luke then includes a story of Jesus at age 12 in the Temple, which was not one of our assigned Sunday morning texts, and then Luke jumps to the Baptism story, when Jesus is presumably around 30 years old. At that baptism, as you recall, Jesus comes out of the water of the River Jordan and the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove. God declares, "You are my Son, my beloved. With you I am well pleased." An amazing affirmation and surely a high point for Jesus.

Immediately following that baptismal moment, perhaps while his robes are still damp from the Jordan, Jesus heads into the wilds. As our text states, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." So we have just traveled back in time to the transition point before Jesus actually begins any of that public ministry I just described. Prior to this text in Luke, he's been a carpenter, an honorable and stable way of life. Then he's baptized by John, and now he's led into the desert wilderness, where for 40 days, he will experience temptations---the temptations which are so prevalent in a time of great transition. He will transition from his stable and secure life of carpentry into a perilous life as an itinerant preacher, teacher, and healer. And

while we know how the story has continued on from this point, Jesus, at the time of this text, does not. These are real temptations, real struggles, for Jesus, and he fashions a new identity in this time of immense transition and upheaval in his life. For the next 40 days, Jesus is being tempted, or tested, by the devil in the wilderness.

Without going into a detailed examination of each temptation, let's summarize by saying that the devil offers Jesus bread, power, and safety. He urges Jesus to turn stones into bread; he offers Jesus all the authority in the world; he tempts Jesus to make sure that angels will protect Him if he's in peril. We are also likely tempted by bread, power, and safety; we all want to have adequate provisions; we all like to be in control; which is to say we all want to feel safe. These temptations are a double-edged sword. We are both tempted *towards* something---ease of bread, the thrill of power, the comfort of safety. But we are also tempted to turn *away* from something: we are lured *away* from trusting God and God's provision for us and God's guidance for us. Satan tempts us to give into anxiety and uncertainty and doubt when facing life's transitions, and to sell our souls---to cling to things, to forget God's goodness, to cease to trust that God is with us and has a plan for us. That's what the devil is selling; don't trust God. Give into despair. Be fearful. Turn my way. What we always must remember is this: It's a lie; the devil is a liar. "Diablos," the Greek word for devil, means *one who deceives*. Yet it's a sweet sounding lie that catches us right where we're vulnerable.

But Jesus turns the tables right back on the Devil, the one who lies. He withstands the temptations of the Adversary. He responds: "There is more to life than bread. I will worship God alone. I will not test God's love for me. Because I trust in the provision, the goodness, and

the guidance of the Lord. I will not give in to fear and greed and sell my soul to you, Satan. “

And because of this, Jesus moves through his time of temptation and transition into the 3 years of intensive ministry that will follow, leading up to his death. 3 years in which he turns the world upside down, changes history, redeems humanity, and shows the kind of grace and courage under pressure of which we can only dream.

Whatever transitions we may be facing in our lives, they are not likely to reach the level of significance of either of these which we read about this morning in our Scriptures. And yet, for us, they are still huge. They still leave us vulnerable to temptation. Vulnerable to anxiety and a grasping for security with things. Vulnerable to forgetting God’s goodness, to cease trusting in God to lead us into the future, as God has led us in the past. We don’t have easy answers for this, but we have two powerful examples in these texts. In our lesson from Deuteronomy, we are urged in this direction: Create your own personal creed of what God has done for you already, and remember that creed; remember the goodness of God. In fact, look to trust God so much that you can give thanks and be generous, even during times of transition. And in our lesson from Luke we learn this: Rely on God’s Spirit and Word, as Jesus does, when Satan comes calling to lure you away from faith and towards anxiety and doubt. And the thing about all of the transitions of our lives, even of this transitional season of sprinter, is that they don’t last forever. They pass. We move through them towards a more settled place. But what matters is this: whatever place we find ourselves, and whatever transition we go through to get there, God is with us. God is good. God leads us and provides for us. We need not fear. Amen.