

Rev. Dr. Craig Howard
“The Gift of Transition”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, December 13, 2020

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
but you shall be called priests of the LORD,
you shall be named ministers of our God;
you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations,
and in their riches you shall glory.*

John 1:19-28

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, ‘I am not the Messiah.’ And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’ Then they said to him, ‘Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, “Make straight the way of the Lord” ’ as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, ‘Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?’ John answered them, ‘I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.’ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

From the beginning of our second lesson, you would think that John the baptizer has an identity problem. When he is approached by the religious leaders and asked who he is he answers by telling them who he is not. John says,

"Let me start by saying that I am not the Messiah. I am not the Christ." "Are you Elijah?" "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" "Nope." "If you are not the Messiah and you are not Elijah and you are not the Prophet, then who are you?" What if the religious leaders are saying that John doesn't fit into their preconceived categories. John is a square peg in a round hole. John is clear on his identity. It is the religious leaders who do not know where to place John in their religious topography. They kept asking John if he is the endgame, if he is the one that they have been waiting for. Could it be though that God was doing something different with John, something that they did not expect? Something that they did not anticipate. I believe God is doing something that they had never seen because God is taking Israel through a transition. And perhaps John is the first interim pastor called by God. John stands in between the Old Testament and the New, the old order and the new that is coming.

We are living in changing times, nationally. We are changing presidents. The election was almost six weeks ago and the clock of change is ticking and winding down for this current administration. In addition to political change, on Friday a vaccine was approved to fight the coronavirus. If all things go well, sometime next year the majority of citizens will be inoculated and things will begin to return to the old normal. Maybe. We'll see. Also, as you know I have accepted a new call with the Presbyterian Foundation and will be leaving my position as your presbytery leader. This was going to be my last sermon as presbytery leader in this presbytery but I've been asked if I would preach one more time in January. And of course, I will [laughter]. And you, you are in a time of transition. You are between pastors. And a transitional pastor will begin and take you through the entire transitional process. A change in the White House, a cure for a coronavirus, a change in Presbytery leadership, and a change in this church-- these are all times of transition. These are times of change. And I think we can say, like Bob Dylan, "The times, they are a-changin'." Now, John the Baptizer was clear that he was not the one Elijah or the prophet-- they had promised and that they were waiting for. Instead, he'd been sent to prepare the way, make straight the path for the Messiah. John had been called to pick up all the stones that may twist the ankle of the Messiah and to level the ground, so that the anointed one would not lose the balance and fall. John was called to straighten the road so that God's anointed can see what's coming ahead and not worry or be surprised about something coming from around the corner. What a description of transitional work.

This work during the interim is difficult, demanding, and requires constant diligence. Our Presbytery has a process for when a congregation is in the between time. It has a process that requires steps to end one ministry, bring an interim on board, then call the new pastor. The interim period when the transitional pastor is serving is critical to the success for the one who's coming afterward. Our process is designed to make the best possible fit between the transitional pastor and the congregation. We make sure the transitional pastor is certified and properly trained in this type of unique ministry. But there is one thing that we do not have a process for, one thing we did not put on the drawing board or create a beautiful schematic chart for, that is: how are the members of the church supposed to act during the transitional time? What is the role of the congregation in the transitional process? Now, since I'm going through a personal transition as I'm leaving my role as Presbytery leader, this question is acute and present. Since I'm leaving, I know that I am a lame duck. And that anything I have to say can be ignored without penalty. The truth is, of course, this has always been the case, so I do appreciate those times you did listen although I'm not a three points and a point type of preacher, today I will provide three steps and a scripture for how a congregation should travel through the interim process and come out on the other side. First, I recommend prayer. There's something about taking time to commune with God. Commune with God when we are in a difficult place, or have a hard decision to make, or just desiring God's companionship during our life's journey. For some, prayer means sitting or getting on your knees in an intentional conversation with God. For others, it means taking a walk and being with nature or driving and listening for God's voice and direction. Still, others find reading a prayer while meditating to be meaningful. I find daily scripture reading followed by a written prayer to be helpful. But no matter how you practice the spiritual discipline of prayer, during this transitional time, during this interim period, it's time to double down on it.

The God of change and transformation is in the life of this congregation. At some point over the next 12 months, you will probably be returning to this building. Whether or not you return the same way you left will depend upon

your prayer life. It will depend upon how connected you are to God individually. There is great capacity for transformation when going through the transition time. When a people of God humbles themselves and pray and seek God's face, God has promised that God will hear from heaven. God will bring forgiveness and healing and will respond to the prayers of the righteous. Prayer.

Second, I would encourage you to purge your life. The time of transition is a call to self-examination. During this interim time, we go before God and, like the [inaudible], we ask, "Prove me, O' Lord, and try me, and test my heart and my mind." During the transitional time, we ask if our attitude is right. Are we spending our money and using our resources with the right balance and correct intentions? Are we doing our part to keep harmony in our relationships? We pray, "Prove me. Try me. Test me. O' God test my heart and my mind. Try my motives. During the transitional time, we have to be willing to let go of some things and to take on other things. We must be willing to allow God to make change in our lives, and so that we can be a part of the change that is happening in this congregation. Prayer. Purge. Third, during the transitional time, I would encourage you to participate. Participate. Now is not the time to hide your light and gifts under a bushel. In order for Kirkwood to be the church God is calling for it to be, it will take all hands on deck.

One of the gifts of this pandemic is that many people have been stepping up and stepping forward in congregations all over the country and in this presbytery. People who were sitting in the background are now leading the technology, the prayers, the phone call ministries. What is your gift? What cake you bring to the transitional process? What is God leading you to be a part of or to take on? When you are called to serve, be willing to say yes. Be willing to participate. In his book *Transitions*, William Bridges writes about the transitional time as a time of inner reorientation. He writes, and I quote, "It is the phase our modern world pays least attention to. Treating ourselves like appliances that can be plugged in and plugged out, unplugged again and again at will, or cars that stop and start with the twist of a key. We have forgotten the importance of fallow time and winter and rest in music." End quote.

Friends, I challenge you to take this time to pray, to purge, and be willing to participate. Take this time of transition as the opportunity to experience God's presence and be immersed in Christ's grace and be led by the Holy Spirit. And I would like to leave you with the scripture from Colossians 3:12-15. This is a text that I have often applied to the entire Presbyterian, and when I read it, I think about each individual congregation. And I think that this as a scripture that's about our goal in our life together, so please listen for God's word to us. Colossians 3, "As God's Chosen Ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another. And if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful." Amen.