

“Transitions”

Deut. 34:1-12, Ps. 90, I Thess 2:1-8, Matt. 22:34-46
Lynn Japinga, Hope Church, Oct. 23, 2011

Last Saturday there was a story in the religion section of the Grand Rapids Press about the future of Mars Hill Church in Grandville, now that Rob Bell, the pastor, has announced that he is leaving. Will the church lose members who attended only because they liked Bell’s preaching? Will the church be able to function without the pastor who started the church and has been its center for a number of years? One spokesperson said that it was hard to even imagine Mars Hill without Rob Bell, so the church may have some ups and downs for a while.

It’s no wonder they are a bit anxious, because there is another very public pastoral transition that has not gone so well. Robert Schuller retired a few years ago from the Crystal Cathedral, and first his son succeeded him, and now his daughter. But the church is bankrupt and the buildings are for sale, and Schuller’s children are suing the church for back wages. Transitions are hard, and sometimes they bring out the worst in us.

It’s not only religious institutions that struggle with changes in leadership ... or potential changes. Friday’s paper had a story about possible Republican candidates for the presidential primary, and all their conflicts and in-fighting. Transitions are hard, and sometimes they bring out the worst in us.

We all have these transitions, or experience their effects. Retirement, graduation, a new job, or no job, the end of a relationship, a change in health. When something ends ... high school, a job, a relationship, good health ... we feel loss and grief. When a pastor leaves, or when the CEO retires, there can be a lot of anxiety and conflict about who will

fill that vacuum. Starting something new ... a new job, a new school, a new relationship ... that is scary. Will we be successful? Will we make new friends? Will the new boss be better or worse than the old one? Will the new pastor care about us?

In the Old Testament lesson for today, Moses faced a particularly difficult transition. Moses had not had an easy time of it as the leader of the Israelites. They were a stubborn bunch with a lot of complaints. But after forty years, they knew him and he knew them, and it seemed like Moses would be the best leader to take them into the new land.

But no. Moses went up on the mountain and God showed him all the land that the Israelites were about to occupy, but then said that Moses did not get to go! All those years of leading these recalcitrant people, listening to their complaints and trying to find food and water in the desert, all that begging God not to destroy them ... all that WORK, and now when the reward was spread out before him, Moses had to stay behind? That did not seem fair.

The text is not very clear about why Moses did not get to go. There are a couple of verses which suggest that Moses had once been disobedient or angry or arrogant, and God's punishment was not letting him go to the promised land. (This seems odd, given how often the people made God angry!) There are a couple of other verses which suggest that Moses was being punished for the sins of the people, not his own. But it may be that these were simply attempts to explain and justify this odd action of God. It did not seem fair that Moses could not lead the people into the land after he expended so much energy to take care of them for forty long years.

In this text, it simply says that Moses would not cross over. No reason. And then, Moses died. He didn't even get to move into Freedom Village or the Warm Friend and enjoy his retirement! But he also didn't have to watch the people go on without him.

But the people had to deal with a future without Moses. The text is very matter of fact about this. They wept for him for thirty days, and then the grieving was over and they moved on. Joshua had already been named as the heir apparent, and the people seemed to quickly shift their loyalties and obedience to him.

After such a long and intense relationship with such a powerful and charismatic leader, it appears that this transition worked fairly well. Except, of course, for Moses, who didn't even have a tombstone with his name on it. How did they do it? A few clues from the text:

The people were not paralyzed by grief. They mourned for thirty days, and then they moved on. That sounds a little quick! But thirty days was longer than the usual formal mourning period. The text isn't suggesting that people who lose a spouse or a child or a friend buck up and quit grieving after 30 days. That kind of grief takes a whole lot longer. But in a more institutional sense, when we are in the midst of transition, there comes a point when it is wise to be honest about the grief and loss, recognize the pain we feel, but not let it keep us stuck.

2. They moved on to the next thing. Moses looked out and saw the new land. It wasn't as good as being there, but at least he got close enough to see it. The people did not stay in Moab forever. They grieved, and then they packed up and moved on. They focused on the future. They knew there was no prophet quite like Moses. They knew he had been an amazing leader. But now he was gone and there was a new leader. They

focused on God and the land and the law they had received. Maybe that sounds a little cavalier. But if Mars Hill Church continues to grieve the loss of Rob Bell, it will never really move on to the next phase of its life. If the Crystal Cathedral keeps trying to preserve family business, the church will not be able to move on to a new phase of its life. If we continue to be angry and bitter and anxious about a loss or a transition, it will be difficult to move on to the next phase of our lives.

A third reason this transition worked well is that wisdom was passed on and received. Joshua was full of the spirit of wisdom, the text says, because Moses had laid his hands on him. This wasn't some magic power that Moses could zap into Joshua with his finger! It was more a matter of mentoring than of magic. Moses likely had spent time with Joshua giving advice and sharing insights. And Joshua listened. And the people respected the wisdom they saw in Joshua and were willing to listen to him.

I wonder how much respect we have for wisdom now? Everything is new, and the old is considered outdated and irrelevant. One of the most rewarding aspects of my professional life in the last few years has been doing oral history interviews with a number of retired RCA ministers, missionaries and lay people. For three to four hours they tell me about their lives and their ministries. They demonstrate such love for and loyalty to the denomination, even though they are painfully aware of its flaws. They loved their work and they loved their people and they have a lot of great insights about the church. They have a lot of wisdom to offer. But some people think that because the ministers started their careers in the 1950s that they have nothing to say to the church now. But wisdom is longer lasting than that. Wisdom continues to speak even though the circumstances are different.

Receiving wisdom is mostly about asking questions, and listening to the answers. Talk to your parents and grandparents. Talk to the church members who have been around for a while. Talk to people whose work you admire. And if nobody is asking, you should write your own memoirs! In a world that seems to be full of both quick fixes and despair of any lasting change, there is wisdom out there if we just listen for it.

Transitions are hard work. And they can bring out the worst in us. It takes courage, both to be the person in transition and the people who experience the changes of another person or an institution. Moses had a deep connection with God. He knew God face to face, the text says, which may not mean a literal face to face encounter, but rather a kind of intimate, trusting relationship. This relationship gave Moses the courage to lead when it was difficult, and to get in God's face in a way, as when Moses begged God not to destroy the Israelites and start over. It gave Moses the courage to come to the end of his life with grace and dignity.

Paul talked about courage too when he wrote to the Thessalonians. He said that he and the other ministers had courage in God to declare the gospel in spite of opposition.

We can see this kind of courage in people around us who are willing to confront injustice.

Where does that courage come from? Where do we find courage when we are anxious and fearful about the future? The Psalm for today ... very familiar words which are often read at funerals. "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting, you are God."

Leaders come and go. Human beings retire. They get sick. They graduate from high school and college and need to move on. Our lives are full of transitions. And they can be scary. And sometimes they bring out the worst in us. But in the midst of all of this is the God who has been our dwelling place in all generations. Amen.