

All around, we are in transition. Today our society celebrates motherhood, perhaps the ultimate transition. Next Sunday, we will be celebrating graduations and other academic transitions in church. This weekend many plans had to be changed or canceled due to Friday's powerful storm and its aftermath, undoubtedly it will force many transitions, and so we pray for all those impacted, and for all who are working on recovery efforts. On a happier note, pretty soon we'll be celebrating the ministry of our music director as she prepares to move on to a wonderful new opportunity. Our diocese is in a liminal time between bishops, with no plans yet announced for what will happen next, how, or when. Our society is preparing to transition into summer in many ways. Our nation is already looking ahead to November elections, and the outcomes of wars in Ukraine and the holy land are anybody's guess. For good and for ill, transition is a fact of life, just as it was for the people of the Bible.

You can read Scripture as a chronicle of transitions, a series of crises and responses. Likewise, our liturgical calendar places us in a transition time, a liminal space, this Sunday. We remain in the Great Fifty Days of Easter celebration, but last week included a feast that marks a great transition, the Ascension, Jesus's departure from Earth to heaven. The Ascension is a feast of great joy and awe, but also anxiety and trepidation, for it puts us into a strange time where despite our joy, we feel very much alone. Jesus has left, but the Holy Spirit, whom he promised would be with us, has not yet arrived. You might well imagine the disciples, moments after Jesus receded from view, lowering their gaze to each other, exchanging confused glances, and wondering, "What do we do now?" I imagine that in that moment, the question of which of them would be greatest was never further from their minds, for no one wanted to be responsible for answering that question. But there's nothing wrong with lingering in those moments, perhaps even savoring them.

Liminal spaces, the gaps between the periods of relative stability and familiarity, are notoriously challenging. Time between jobs can be demoralizing. Waiting for other people to make important decisions can be agonizing, especially when those decisions will affect you directly. The gaps between youth and adult, couple and family, living and dead, are enduring inspirations of study, inquiry, and poetry.

Danaan Parry, who went through many remarkable life transitions, wrote about the experience of transition with the dramatic metaphor of the art of trapeze. The segments of our lives that are stable and familiar are trapeze bars, and even if that segment isn't all we'd hoped it would be, we still cling to the bar for dear life, and thus, to the certainty of its course through the air. But inevitably, we feel the bar's momentum running out and we know that we aren't near the platform yet. Pretty soon, holding onto it will no longer be an option. The only thing scarier than that is the sight of a new trapeze bar swinging towards us — and a vast empty space between. Time to let go. Gracefully or not, fearfully or not, ready or not, we are in the air.

Parry wrote that our time hurtling across the gaps is the only real time, the only time when we are open to the full possibilities of our existence. I wouldn't go that far, but clearly transitions are opportunities for wonderful things. In the reading from Acts, the earliest followers of Jesus have gathered in his absence, before the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Without him and without her, they have no mission, no driving force, yet faithfully they wait for the Spirit Jesus promised to send. And even this is not a period of idleness. They take on a critical task of discernment: how the community will function and under whose authority. Peter, exercising apostolic authority and leadership, lays out the requirements for the apostle who would take the place of Judas Iscariot.

Just by doing this, rather than by saying they could go on with eleven doing the work of twelve, Peter anticipated and shared in creating the direction of the church, which is both outward and toward God. Peter could have insisted that the community remain in a single group in a single place under his sole control, but instead he set up a system that could provide for the spiritual sustenance of its members while dispersing them, and God's Good News of reconciliation, love, and grace, as widely as possible. Note that St. Luke enumerates the crowd as 120 people, and remember that this is still the first, Jewish, generation of the church. Twelve symbolizes the 12 tribes of Israel, of course, a number that must be restored to make the Jewish church symbolically whole. And according to Jewish law, in order to hold almost any service, a minyan, that is, a quorum, of ten must be present. So the numbers show that the Christian community is being set up in such a way that the greatest number of groups could be formed, each with its own authoritative leader. For a time of transition, a lot is getting done.

The other noteworthy feature of this story is the method of selecting the new apostle. The only criterion for being a candidate is having been a follower of Jesus from the beginning — and, apparently, not being Mary. But anyway, they left the decision to chance, which may seem like a bizarre and capricious system for choosing a leader, though when you think of some of the people who have become church leaders through other means, you may find that random chance could have some merits. Interestingly, the Coptic Orthodox Church chooses its Pope by electing three finalists, then choosing one of their names at random. But more to the point, the ancient community accepted when to use its combined wisdom and when to turn a question over to God. Transition times can be powerful reminders of just how deeply we depend on God, if we can take a moment to get over ourselves, and embrace them as

opportunities to search humbly for God. And we know that our dependence is as deep as we are: everything we have, our families, our possessions, our skills, our souls and bodies, all of it is a gift from God.

It is true to say that because of this, we and all we have belong to God. But the more interesting question is, why? Why does God give us these many blessings? There appear to be two answers. One is because God loves us and wants us to be happy. The second is, in order to do God's work in the world. But of course these are two sides of the same coin. While we have a great gift in our freedom to roam, explore, and experiment, each of us will only find our deepest joy when we are doing what God calls us to do — when we are being who God calls us to be. Jesus put it much more eloquently: “so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.” His joy, not ours, is the deepest and greatest we can experience, and the Holy Spirit never ceases leading, and pushing, and moving with us toward that Godly joy.

That spiritual journey always involves many transitions. They can be scary because they look and feel like the transitions of worldly journeys, the journeys we make toward other goals, goals of our own making. The transitions on those other journeys are legitimately dangerous because there is no guarantee that we're reaching for the right bar, and no reason why we shouldn't miss the bar and fall. Though even our falls are transitions, and they can create opportunities for the Holy Spirit to intervene in our lives in wonderful ways, which we may call “blessings in disguise”. However, when we are already moving in the direction, on the journey, that God wants for us, the rules are different. The Holy Spirit will guide our motion and make sure we make the connection we're supposed to make.

When you're on the right journey and making a transition, the

void between trapeze bars won't look any different. The Holy Spirit is not responsible for explaining her work to us, and she doesn't make a habit of doing so. But if you're not too scared, or thrilled, you might just notice that being in the void feels different when you're traveling with the Spirit. It feels different because you're no longer falling. You're flying.

This homily makes reference to "The Parable of the Trapeze" by Danaan Perry, which you may read here:
<http://www.earthstewards.org/ESN-Trapeze.asp>.