

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
March 14, 2010, 4th Sunday of Lent
“The Next Generation”
Joshua 5:10-15

Transitions in life take many forms. You graduate from high school, you start to drive, and transition from childhood to early adulthood. You get married or partnered and transition from singleness to being a couple. You give birth to or adopt a child and transition into being a family. Your parent or parents get older, so you transition into being their caregiver.

Transitions are marked by significant events in our lives, such as graduations, births, retirements, and deaths. Transitions are also marked by events that happen around us that change the way we see the world: life before the nuclear bomb fell on Hiroshima and life after, life before the moon landing and life after, lives changed forever by Vietnam, the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr, the attacks of 9/11, or by individual tragedies the memory of which is with us every day of our lives. We are one person before and one person after.

The Frick Art Museum has an exhibit now that highlights works painted during the Great Depression. During that incredible transitional period in our history when 25% of the country was unemployed, Franklin Delano Roosevelt authorized the Public Works Art Project, which ran from December 1933 to June 1934. In that short time, it employed over 3700 artists, and produced 15,000 works of art. Imagine government providing emergency funds for art in place of some of the current beneficiaries of government bailouts and handouts! You endure a Great Depression; you live through a job loss or a family tragedy. You shift from being part of one generation into feeling like you’re now a member of a new generation. How do you decide what to hang onto from the past and what to let go of? How do we make sense of it all?

In our bible passage for today, Moses is dead and the years of wandering in the wilderness are finally over. Moses’ successor is Joshua, and there are similarities between the leader of the old generation and the leader of the new generation. Moses led the Hebrews through the Red Sea waters; Joshua led their descendants through the parted waters of the Jordan River. God would speak to Moses from a burning bush, telling him to take off his shoes for he was standing on holy ground. God would also speak to Joshua through a messenger, an angel, who would say almost the exact same words: “Take off your sandals for the place where you stand is holy.”

But in Joshua 5, a major transition has taken place. There in the plains of Jericho, the Israelites kept the Passover by eating unleavened bread and produce of the land, for the manna sent from heaven ceased that very day. During the years wandering the wilderness, the Israelites were largely sustained by manna sent by God. But once they crossed into the Land of Promise, once they shifted from being a nomadic people to a people who planted crops and established farms, the manna stopped. They moved from lives of absolute dependence on God to lives of covenantal independence in relation with God. Those are “churchy” words – so let me unpack them a bit.

You know the old story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and how the couple lived a life totally dependent on God. But because of pride and sin, they fell from innocence. They were cast out; now all their descendants live outside of Eden but still in a covenant relationship with God our Creator. It was a major transition – a life in a literal paradise, all things coming from God, to a life in a much harder world: of thorns and painful childbirth, sweat and labor, earthquakes and floods. We live in a covenant partnership with God, but sometimes we long for the imagined paradise of Eden.

Later, when the Hebrew people were following Moses in the wilderness, God’s care for them was obvious; it was there in the manna they ate and the water the Lord caused to spring out from the rocks. But a transition came once they crossed the Jordan River. The manna stopped; now they had to conquer the land, plant crops, and build a life in covenant relationship with God and one another. They could do it – the land would support them if they treated it with respect and if they looked out for the widows, orphans, and weak ones in their midst. But after this transition, things felt different. Before they’d had blessings fall from heaven all around them. Now they had real work and real responsibilities – or so the story is told.

We often tell similar stories about our own lives. We had wonderful childhoods, paradises of freedom, friendships, and fun. But then we transitioned to adulthood and everything changed. We had simple lives when first married, but once kids came along, things got busier and harder. We were doing pretty well, but then our parents got sick and things got complicated. We look back at the Moses Generation and picture everything as wonderful, back when manna seemed to fall from the heavens, back then when we used to know all our neighbors and walk to school, back then before high taxes and non-stop political campaigns, back then before the Internet and cell phones took over our lives, back then when they used to sing hymns we liked in church, back then when life was simple. Now we’re the Joshua Generation; now we live outside of Eden, on the other side of the Jordan, on this side of World War II, this side of 9/11, and daily we wonder what we are supposed to be doing.

Well, what did Joshua do back then? For one thing, he celebrated Passover. He had the people tell the honest stories of their past. Have you ever been to a Passover Seder? It's not a light-hearted romp down Nostalgia Lane. They eat bitter herbs and dip unleavened bread in salt water because life in Egypt was bitter and salty tears were often shed. We need to tell the honest stories of our past. It was never a case of paradise one day and hard toil east of Eden the next day. It is not true that the 50's were great but the 60's were terrible. It is not true that Civil Rights for all just happened the day Martin gave his "I Have A Dream" speech in this nation in which Malcolm X said "the [American] South is anything south of the Canadian border."¹ We honestly need to tell our children how they used to show film footage from Vietnam so we could see what a napalm attack does to a village, instead of reading accounts about a sanitized war in Iraq and Afghanistan where attacks are made with drone missiles and civilian casualties are blithely called "collateral damage."

Here's the part we too often forget: We are both the Moses generation and the Joshua generation. We are the old ways and the new ways, the problem-makers and the problem-solvers combined. And if we're faithful, just before we tell the stories of our history, we will take off our shoes and remember that we stand on holy ground. We are the Passover people, who tear off a piece of unleavened bread and dip it into salty water, but who steadfastly trust the Lord of the Exodus and the Lord of 2010. We are holy communion people, who tear pieces off loaves of bread and eat with one another as equals in the eyes of God now just as we were equals when Jesus fed the 5,000 from a few loaves of bread long ago. We may close our eyes at night feeling like the Moses generation and then open our eyes each morning as the Joshua generation, but God, who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, sees us just the same and is with us nighttime and daytime and all the times of our lives.

I mentioned how we experience transitions in our lives. At times we feel like the Old Generation, the people of the past; at times we feel like the Next Generation, the children and adults working for the future. How do we make sense of it all? We can't – not by ourselves. That is the critical message of our faith, and precisely what the world so desperately needs to hear. Listen to what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth: *From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. In Christ there is a new creation; everything old has passed away – everything has become new!*

You can't sort out your life on your own. I'm sorry. You can't analyze the changes and transitions in your life and come up with clear answers about what to do and where to go. The predicament of our life (which involves sinfulness and bad decisions and violence and greed) cannot be understood unless we look at it from the perspective of someone else's life – Jesus Christ, who took on our sin, who redeemed us from our bad decisions, violence and greed. The Crucified Christ brings our lives into focus, just as the Resurrected Christ gives our lives hope. We don't regard anyone, especially not ourselves, from a human point of view, but only from a Christ-point of view. In that moment, everything is new. And at last we understand what we are to do. We have been given a ministry of reconciliation and that is our role in the world.

Is this easy? No. But it is what we are called to be and to do. Christ says, Yes, there are transitions and changes; yet lose your life for my sake and you will gain it. Deny your family, all those around you who define you and delight you, and take up your cross and follow me. To understand you, you must first acknowledge me, says the Lord. So take off your shoes. Break bread and tell the Passover stories again. Talk about being the Moses generation. Talk also about being the Joshua generation. But do so while remembering that God is the Lord of all generations. And in the life of Christ, in the moment on the cross, the darkness which fell over the land but which was transformed by the light of Easter morning, all history finds its centerpiece. That and that alone is the real transition in life. Imagine that! That is the pivotal moment separating all time into a before and an after – a prior generation and a next generation.

This is the counter-cultural message we boldly proclaim. This is the truth that re-defines all the other events of our life and our world. It may well be too much to understand, but it is not too much to believe. For that, thanks be to God!

¹ Interview with Dr. Ben Chavis, *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 2010, p. 16AR.