

Alert worshipers may recall that last Sunday, Transfiguration Sunday, I commented on how nature was assisting us in thinking about transfiguration or transformation by moving us from winter into spring in the week that had preceded last Sunday. A week with days in the 40s and lots of sunshine and melting. Apparently to reprimand me, nature took a step back from that transition this last week in order to give us another taste of winter on Tuesday and Wednesday. Now we're moving on towards spring again, but you'd have to admit this whole change of seasons thing is bumpy and uneven. Seasonal transitions don't happen seamlessly. Just like our own life transitions and changes, which also rarely just move in a neat straight line, but almost always include a step back for several steps forward, and veer off track altogether, and then maybe move forward in a straight line again for a time. Both in weather and in life, transitions

can be very awkward places in which to be, when things are not quite one thing nor yet another; it can be confusing and sometimes hope inducing and sometimes discouraging. The upside to our current less-than-seamless winter to spring transition, is that it situates us ideally to relate to lessons for today, both of which also feature transitions which are less-than-seamless. 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?

So now would be a good time to honestly name the elephant in the room when it comes to transitions, and that's my upcoming retirement, right? Looking at it through *my* eyes, retirement is obviously a major transition. I am anticipating it, I am feeling uncertain about how it will actually be, and I am grieving what I will be leaving behind. It's exciting, it's bittersweet; it's unsettling. For 39 years, one of the major pieces of my identity has been that of being a Pastor. Who will I be when I'm not actively pastoring a congregation?

Now, it turns out my retirement isn't only about *me*; it's about all of *you* too! It very directly impacts this congregation. I've been here for over 20 years as this congregation's first solo pastor. Prior to that, Knife River contracted for 20% of the time of Bethlehem's Pastor up in Two Harbors. Many of you who are newer,

and there *are many* of you, have only known me as the Pastor of this congregation. That's true of the young among us as well. I was rather tickled to learn of the astonishment of one of our congregational children, when told by their parent that Pastor John Reppe had been the Pastor they knew growing up, as he was serving Bethlehem then and put some time in here also. "You mean the Pastor was a *man*?" this child asked in total disbelief. I was the only Pastor they'd known; they didn't know pastors came in any other flavor. For years now, I've preached every Sunday, prayed for healing at bedsides and at altar railings, have served Holy Communion, have led studies and meetings, have visited the homebound, have provided counsel for the troubled. And as of June 1, I'll no longer be doing any of that. No point in denying that's a significant transition. It's a transition that offers all kinds of exciting opportunities for considering the direction of our congregation moving forward and how that is best served. But it's also a bittersweet time for most, with grieving in the mix, and a whole host of unsettled feelings---what will it be like to be Berge-free at Knife River Lutheran Church? It may be quite fine, actually, but it's also unsettling and anxiety raising. It's a transition. It may be great, it may be difficult, it's almost certain to be awkward and full of those bumps and going-off-the-rail moments that are a part of *all* transitions.

And apart from that particular transition of my retirement, we all face all kinds of changes and transitions all the time. Things like: retirement, getting a new job, moving, having children or having an empty nest, becoming grandparents, 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. Which can lead us, in turn, to behave in emotionally reactive and not-so-helpful ways.

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 for themselves 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 the 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 tyle, here it is just one person: Jesus. As we meet up with Jesus in this fourth chapter of Luke, Jesus has not yet begun his ministry. In chapter 1 of Luke, we hear of prophecies and angelic visions that precede the birth of the Christ. In chapter 2, Jesus is born. In chapter 3, Jesus is baptized by John the Baptizer in the Jordan River. 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. And a way for Jesus to understand his own identity and purpose.

But then the author of Luke presents us with another way to understand Jesus' identity, by including a lengthy genealogy of Jesus, tracing Him back to King David and beyond. Luke is letting us know that Jesus, as the Messiah, is of the house and lineage of David. As Jesus is *also* aware, of course. So, Jesus has heard God's baptismal claim on Him, and He knows of His past lineage and the impact of how that history shapes Him. But as He moves from this time before His ministry has begun into his actual, active ministry as the Christ, He has a time of transition that will teach Him yet *more* about His identity and purpose. We call it "the Temptations".

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." Let's think about the series of transitions Jesus is experiencing. Prior to this morning's text in Luke, Jesus has worked as a carpenter, like his father, Joseph, before him. This was an honorable and stable way of life. But it's not ultimately what God has in mind for Him. Leaving carpentry behind, 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 comes to yet another understanding of His identity in this time of intense transition and upheaval in his life. Which might serve to remind us that sometimes we learn a great deal about ourselves and our identity and purpose in times of transition and struggle. 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 and power in the world; he tempts Jesus to make sure that angels will protect Him if he's in peril, thus guaranteeing His personal safety. We are also likely tempted by bread, power, and safety; we all want to have adequate provisions; we all like to be in control and feel powerful; and 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. Depend on things and on earthly prestige and put yourself first above all else and put God aside. The devil continues: "it'll be sweet, it'll be easy, you'll be fine if you forget about God and Gospel values." It sounds alluring, but 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 anxious, doubtful, and 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 2 lessons from Scriptures. And yet, for us, they are still big. 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 claim that faith; 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. Remember that the devil is a liar, but God is faithful and true. What matters in all transitions 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.