

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT

on 22 Pentecost, October 25, 2026 by The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton

Prop 25 A: Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18. Psalm 1. 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8. Matthew 22:34-46

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Next week we as a congregation will transition to a new season with the Rev. Steven Wilco as our half time pastoral leader. He will be at St. James, Glastonbury next Sunday and on every 1st and 3rd Sunday. He will be with us the following Sunday and every 2nd and 4th Sunday. He will spend regular time in both places during the week. It will take some time for him and for both congregations to figure out how best he can support us all in our life and ministries.

Have you thought much about what this new season of our life as a parish may be like? What are your feelings as we prepare to welcome Steven as our new priest?

Everyone on our vestry who met and talked with Steven is very excited about who he is and the quality of spiritual and ministry leadership he will bring to us. The vestry of St James Glastonbury were also unanimously enthusiastic about the qualities Steven will bring. My friends and colleagues in the Diocese of Western Massachusetts where Steven last served were enthusiastic about him as a person and as a leader. Steven and I met last week, and we had a very positive time together. So many of us are eager to welcome Steven with enthusiasm for this next season in our life as a congregation.

And on another level, there may also be some anxiety. Will Steven respect and care for our congregation, for each of us and our concerns? Will he help us deepen our connection with God and grow spiritually? Will he help us work together more faithfully and effectively to serve the needs of people in our local area and the world? Will we miss being a lay led community? How will he be able to serve two congregations without being burnt out by the demands?

Steven will be asking similar questions and wondering how we will support and work together with him and with each other. He is very aware that there are always surprises and unknowns when a new priest enters the ongoing life of two congregations.

The anxiety of the unknown for both congregations and for Steven can be a gift inviting all of us to trust God more deeply, and to pray our way through the surprises of this time of transition together.

The Bible includes many stories of transitions to new leaders. After Moses came Joshua, After Samuel came King Saul, then King David, then King Solomon, then conflicts divided the nation into two separate states. After Jesus ascended into heaven, his 12 disciples became a team of leaders with Peter usually in charge. Then Paul showed up as a missionary apostle to non-Jews. One thing we notice about all these transitions in the Bible is that ALWAYS, there were some tensions, complaints, conflicts when a community transitioned to a new leader.

In a book titled, Transitions, William Bridges uses the example of the stages the people of Israel experienced in their transition from being slaves in Egypt to trusting God and Moses to guide them into a New Place and season of their lives. First, they had to leave their former life in Egypt; then they wandered in the wilderness for a time; then they crossed over into the New Place and season to which God led them. As we go through our transition with a new pastoral leader, we can expect that we will go through our own version of these same three stages of transition.

The first stage of a healthy transition is **leaving Egypt or letting go of the past season**.

When a transition begins, things will change. It is helpful to remember what we appreciated about the past four-year season of being a God guided, lay led congregation... and also remember the challenges and struggles of the past season. Every season has both gifts and challenges. We can't make a healthy move into a new season with new leadership until we both value the gifts we have experienced in the current season AND let go of being bound by that past so we can open ourselves to the changes that God will bring as we enter a new season with a new leader.

The people of Israel kept thinking about the former good things they experienced in their past and they complained to Moses about what they had lost by leaving Egypt. It will be important for us to notice when we are complaining that things are "not like they used to be" during our upcoming transition. In those moments, if we listen, God will remind us that it is good to appreciate what we valued in the past, but we are not living there anymore. It is time to let go of the past and focus on how God is seeking to guide us in the new season of our life.

After leaving Egypt, the people of Israel entered a **wilderness time** when they experienced disorientation. They were wandering in a new and unfamiliar place, confused and uncertain where they were going and afraid that they could not trust God and Moses to lead them into a new and safe place where they could thrive.

Whenever there is a change in leadership or direction in a family, a business or a parish, there will be uncomfortable wilderness periods of confusion, of not knowing what is happening and where or how things are moving. The community is not what it used to be, and it is not yet clear what it will become in time. There is an uncomfortable in-between wilderness time of unknowns.

None of us know that kind of wilderness disorientations and challenges we will encounter as we live into this new God guided season of our life as a congregation. We do know that there will be some bumps in the road. They may be gentle, and some may push us out of our comfort zones. How will we respond to whatever comes? We can choose to embrace our wilderness times as opportunities to turn our frustrations, struggles and confusions into prayers, asking and trusting God to guide us when we do not know the way. By prayerfully, patiently, honestly working with each other through wilderness times, God can help us all learn and grow and discover new directions God is opening up for us.

The people of Israel were in the wilderness for 40 years. Thankfully, for congregations, it does not usually take that long, but there is no formula for how long the wilderness stage lasts. Eventually God led the people of Israel into their **new land**, their new fruitful season of life, which is the third stage of transition. Eventually, in congregational transitions, with God's help, as the leader and community pray and work together, God usually opens up a new and fruitful season they could not have imagined.

Of course, the new season that emerges also has new challenges, continuing needs to work and pray together to discern and follow God's guidance. And eventually, clergy and lay leaders move or die, and a new season of transition begins for everyone. Transitions remind us that our deepest trust must be in God, not in the best human leaders or best experiences of life as a congregation.

The Scriptures focus on two important actions each of us can bring to this transition time to help it be a healthy time for our development as followers of Jesus.

First, our reading from Leviticus includes an outline of how God created human beings to relate with each other in ways that are just and honest and respectful. Moses concludes with a five-word summary of how God created human beings to live with each other, which is also quoted by Jesus in today's gospel: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love for our neighbors is essential to living well through this and every transition. And responding in loving ways is not always easy when our buttons get pushed and anxiety grows in us. Even with people we love, there are times when we feel tension or disappointment or hurt or distance from our neighbor, whether it is someone we live with, our priest or a parishioner or people from St James, or the economic and political situation in our nation and world. God gives us this clear action command from both Moses and Jesus: ALWAYS look for ways to interact with love with your neighbor, including a person or group you experience as your enemy. Love involves respecting the dignity of each person made in the image of God; listening to what they have to say, to their situation and context. Then speaking and acting in ways that seek what is good, right and just for the neighbor as well as what is fair and just for oneself and the community.

Jesus knew that conflicts will arise in human relationships and communities and transitions. He calls us to find healthy ways we can practice love even in difficult situations.

The second action that the whole of Scripture call us to embody is prayer, asking God's Spirit to help and guide us and all people to seek God's will to be done in all situations, both joyful situations and difficult situations. Constant prayer is the fuel that can empower God's love to guide us through this time of transition into a new season of fruitful and effective life and ministry as a congregation in service to God's world.

So, this morning is a time to ask: what is God inviting you and me to be and do to make positive contributions to the life and ministry of this congregation as we transition into this new season, welcoming and working with Steven as our new pastor and spiritual leader?

Let's close our eyes and be in the presence of God who loves us all right here, right now...

Be aware that we are on the edge of a significant transition in our life as a congregation...

What are your hopes and concerns as you think about entering into this season of transition as a congregation with Steven as our pastor? In the silence of your heart, offer your hopes and concerns to Jesus...

As we enter a new season as a parish, in what specific ways might God be inviting you to help make this a positive and life-giving transition for Steven and for all of us as a congregation? ...

Please turn with me to the back of the Book of Common Prayer, to page 833. In this season of transition, this familiar prayer attributed to St Francis can be a helpful prayer to use regularly, not only for our congregation, but also for our nation and world. Let us pray it together now:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

(BCP p.833)