

“Now What”

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Genesis 7

Then the LORD said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation. . . .⁵ And Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him. . . .

¹¹ In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. ¹² The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights. ¹³ On the very same day Noah with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah’s wife and the three wives of his sons entered the ark, ¹⁴ they and every wild animal of every kind, and all domestic animals of every kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind—every bird, every winged creature. ¹⁵ They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life. ¹⁶ And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the LORD shut him in.

¹⁷ The flood continued forty days on the earth; and the waters increased, and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. ¹⁸ The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth; and the ark floated on the face of the waters. . . .

Noah and the ark is one of the earliest Old Testament stories we learn as children. Yet after childhood, what does it have to offer us? When read this morning’s text I’m guessing some of you wondered – at least for a moment – what the new pastor was up to.

We don’t know each other yet. That’ll come, but for today, and the next couple weeks, I thought we might talk about transition. I’ve learned a bit about this topic in the last couple months... as I made my goodbyes in Appleton and prepared to join you in Wausau.

One thing I learned is that change and transition are two very different things. Change is the stuff that happens in our lives. Births. Deaths. New or lost jobs. Retirement. Engagement. Divorce. Graduation. Going off to college. Transition is about our way of working through these changes.

Our text today speaks of change. This is no trip to grandma’s. Rather than “Are we there yet?” the question might be “Where exactly are we going?” Or even, “Will anything ever be good again?”

This second question is one that we can all connect with. When the world is turned upside down, by events wonderful or awful, or by something as ordinary as getting a new pastor, we are called to face things we might have preferred not to face.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. In healthy transition, there are three parts. First, there’s an ending. It can be anything from the end of being a twosome when a baby is born to the end of the freedom that comes with giving up one’s car when we realize we need to stop driving.

Second is the neutral time between what has ended and what will eventually begin. It could be the period between graduation and getting that perfect job or the break between retirement and discovering God's purpose for the next segment of your life. Then, at the last, comes the new beginning.

Okay, quick review. What comes first? And what comes last? And in the middle? Yes, and experts tell us that all three components are important. in. that. order.

Most of us aren't very good at waiting. We're not fond of those times in-between. We'd prefer to skip from the last thing right into the next. But those same experts tell us again that the in-between time is vital if we are to have a good connection with what comes next.

"The activities of your ordinary life keep you 'you'."ⁱ They keep us behaving in the same ways. By allowing ourselves to enter into neutral time, we pause – or even break – from business as usual.

By *not* doing what we usually do, this becomes a time of transformation. We rest – and ready ourselves – for what God intends might happen next. We might aimlessly walk along the river, birdwatch, learn to flip pancakes, play with the dog, or study the cracks in the plaster ceiling.

It seems like the Genesis writers knew about transition, recording an ending, a beginning, and a long wait in between. Noah, his wife, and their family have a life – we know nothing about this life except that Noah practices following God's lead. He is righteous. Then this life ends. When a way of life ends, it doesn't really matter how good or bad it was. It was our life. And we miss it. We can be sure that they do too. A cataclysm ends that life and suddenly they're adrift... with nothing but a lot of questions and no answers. When have you been adrift like this? Maybe you're there now.

When we read this text like we did as children, we just find an amazing story. Noah builds an ark. All these animals pile in. It rains. And rains. Until it stops. There's a raven, a dove, and a rainbow. It's all pretty... and simple. I don't know most of you yet, but I'm guessing that if you've lived more than a dozen years, you've learned that life is seldom simple. It wouldn't have been simple for the people in our text either.

Can't you imagine Noah yelling at the woodpecker to stop pecking holes in the ark? What do you suppose happens when you put all those carnivores in close proximity to easy meals? Think of the rabbits and other rodents doing what they do best – which might be either chewing on wood or procreation, depending upon your imagination, but neither of which are particularly helpful during six months on a boat. Can't you just see Mrs. Noah taking a breather on deck, yelling at the heavens? Or any of them shaking their fists at God? "What were you thinking?"

The Genesis writers would have been okay with those imaginings. They recorded the old, old stories so that future generations could learn what it means to be faithful or to be righteous. What it means to follow God's path for our lives. Noah is righteous but that doesn't mean he's a cardboard cut-out of a human being. He is as complex as any of us. We want to remember this.

Too often people wrongly believe that we need to behave certain ways, otherwise, maybe God won't like us. Or we won't be good enough. What God asks of us is that we behave like the people God knows we can be. As much as we can in any given moment.

Today and for the next couple weeks, we will be thinking about what the bible's "Forty Days" stories can teach us. Beside the forty *years* of the exodus story, we find forty days when Jonah confronts the Ninevites and when Elijah flees from Jezebel's wrath. Jesus fasted forty days in the wilderness, and his post-resurrection appearances spanned forty days.

Louise is in her own forty days experience. Her son graduated in May. Family and friends celebrated at the park with balloons, games, and cake. But Louise's heart is breaking because in a few weeks, Preston heads to college in Nebraska. For her, that's too far away. She's working at opening herself to what might be ahead for her. She doesn't know what it might be, but as a person of faith, she's trusting that good things can be ahead for her as well as her son.

Forty is a go-to word in the bible that's all about hope. It's a reminder that it won't stay this way forever. Forty days is a neutral time for testing the truth of one's life, a time that encourages us to ask ourselves questions, like:

- Is this my real life, or is it a shadow of what my life could be?
- How much is what I'm doing is shaped by people around me, people who know less about who I am than I do?
How much is shaped by God?
- Am I letting God guide my life or do I tend to follow my own impulses?
- Is this the way I want to spend the rest of my life?

When we try to ignore this neutral time, life suffers. Imagine today's story without the time on the ark. Without the break between what was and what might come next, there would have been no renewal. Or... Without forty years in the wilderness to get their minds out of old patterns, the Israelites who had fled Egypt would have headed back there, preferring slavery to the unknowns of what was to come. When we let the forty days do its work, life begins in a new way.

For the last two months, I've lived in that neutral place. Something I loved was ending. I trusted that another thing I loved would soon begin. But I wasn't there yet. Many of you have been there, too. Like Jerry and many other transitioning UM pastors and churches this spring, we worked at making good goodbyes so that everyone would be well prepared for what would come with a pastoral change. But the whole while we were doing this, we hadn't met. We didn't know each other. I was praying for you but I hadn't gotten to start loving you yet. It was hard for me, maybe for you too, but we trusted it was a right thing to do.

Transitions are like this. They're different for everyone. Sometimes the forty days only takes a few weeks, sometimes it takes years. As we're getting to know each other, let's remember this and practice grace with ourselves and each other. Some people will take longer to get beyond what used to be. Others are ready for what's next now. That's okay.

We can't change how Louise feels as she watches Preston prepare for college, but we can listen as she grieves. We can be present as she says goodbye. We can support her in this time when all she sees is what she's losing. We can invite her to join us in new adventures. Soon enough she'll find new joys. Until then, we can love her.

Residing in the neutral times can demand more of us than we want to give. Sometimes we are facing our own space-between. Sometimes it's someone else's that we have to deal with. These times confront each of us however much we'd like to avoid them.

Yet, trusting that such times are rooted in hope, we find that God is with us the whole time, guiding and comforting us. We come through the experience and find that we are in a good,

maybe even a better place. We find ourselves transformed, a more whole version of ourselves. We may not understand it, but we don't have to.

In all the best senses, God is mystery. I'll talk more about mystery another week. For now, let's each of us hold onto the idea that whatever our forty day experience might look like, however long it lasts, we can trust in God's care. God's grace surrounds and enfolds us. And resting in that grace and presence, we will weather any storm.

ⁱ William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, 2nd Ed. 135.