

Series: Transition

June 4, 2017

Title: "Here is your God!"

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Text: Isaiah 40:1-9

Transition

"Then what?"

She sits with her classmates – the Class of 2017 – wearing a robe and a funny hat called a mortar. Its tassel dangles over her eye. In a few moments she will ceremoniously move the tassel from one side of her face to the other.

Speeches, awards, more speeches, and of course the 300 diplomas that had to be handed out. It seems like it will never end. Then at long last her name is called. Graduation!

Then what?

In a funny sort of way the same thing is happening to her grandfather. No cap and gown. Not quite so many speeches at his retirement party. The usual awards and assurances that he can never be replaced and will never be forgotten. Right. But over the whole celebration of a lifetime of work lingers the same question: Then what?

A Three-phase Passage:

They may be forty or more years apart when it comes to their age, but the granddaughter and her grandfather have one thing in common: they are going through a major life *transition*. It may seem that they are just facing a whole lot of changes all at once, but actually something much more profound is happening to – and inside – them. What is at stake for both of them is nothing less than their very *identity*.

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They are beginning a journey that happens in three phases:

- Letting go of the past and its old ways of doing things.

- Going through an in-between time when the old is gone, but the new isn't fully operational, to say the least!
- Coming out of the transition and making a new beginning, with a new identity and a new sense of purpose.

Needless to say, negotiating a major life transition is one of the scariest things we ever do in our lives. No wonder the "deer in the headlights" look when you ask some high school seniors what they plan to do after graduation. Or the disorientation and creeping sense of panic when we bring that first little bundle of joy home from the hospital!

The good news is that it is precisely during transition that we are best situated to make the changes we need to make. As William Bridges writes:

"It is the chaos into which the old form dissolves and from which the new form emerges." (William Bridges, *Managing Transitions*, p. 9)

Between Isaiah 39 and 40:

It is at just such a time of transition that we find ourselves when we turn the page from Isaiah chapter 39 to Isaiah 40. In chapter 39 we are in the world of the Hebrew monarchy. Hezekiah is king of Judah. Solomon's Temple, newly refurbished, stands in all its glory on the Temple Mount. God is at home with His people. Certainly, there are clouds on the horizon – Isaiah's own prediction that the armies of Babylon will one day destroy this entire world. But who knows? We're not there yet.

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And then we come to Isaiah chapter 40. It has been a generation since Babylon's armies marched against Jerusalem and utterly destroyed both city and Temple. The king was captured. His sons put to death before his eyes. Then he was blinded by his enemies and taken off to die in Babylon. The vast majority of the population that survived the siege and sack of the city went into exile with him. There was no more Jerusalem, no more Temple, no more king. Shepherds grazed their goats and sheep in the city's ruins.

The Promised Land had become the wilderness.

But it is into this chaos of loss and destruction that God announces Israel's new identity.

The Announcement

Endings:

William Bridges explains that transitions always start with endings and finish with beginnings. God's word to His people in exile and to the stragglers in ruined Jerusalem was no different. Isaiah begins chapter 40 with these words:

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Isaiah 40: 1-2 NIV [amended]

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her military service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

Endings: God announces a message to destroyed Jerusalem, to be delivered by the exiles in Babylon. The message says that no longer will Jerusalem be embroiled in endless wars. In other words, no longer will Jerusalem be the capital of a small, autonomous kingdom in the Middle East, complete with king and army. From now on, Jerusalem and surrounding Judea will be part of a succession of empires. Her role is to change dramatically. And that means leaving behind her old identity and aspirations.

Endings: God is also announcing that the time of punishment and exile is coming to an end. Her sins have been forgiven and her punishment is complete. No longer will she live under the shadow of impending judgment. It's a brand new day!

Beginnings:

So what will the new reality look like? The LORD gives them a glimpse in the command that follows:

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Isaiah 40:3-4 NIV

A voice of one calling:

"In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

"Every valley shall be raised up, and every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, and the rugged places a plain."

God's people – Jerusalem – are to build a brand new highway. But this will not be the normal route by which you would travel around the Middle East. It's a road that seemingly comes from "nowhere." It is to come from the vast desert to the south and east, from that desolate wilderness where Israel traveled on the Exodus journey and where she first met the LORD.

The LORD is coming back to His people. Their new mission and purpose will be to make the path for Him in their hearts and in their community. This is a key part of their new identity.

And when He comes, not just Israel, but the whole wide world, will finally see God in all His glory:

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Isaiah 40:5 NIV

"And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Questions!

But in between the ending of the old and the beginning of the new is that time of *transition*. It is a time full of questions and short on answers. It is a time of grieving the past and doubting if there even is a future. Listen to how Jerusalem replies to God's announcement:

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Isaiah 40:6-8 NIV

A voice says, "Cry out."

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

"All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD

blows on them. [Slide 8] Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever."

God had said: "Comfort, comfort my people." Now comes the skeptical response: "Your people are as fickle and unstable as grass or wildflowers in the scorching heat of a middle eastern summer. They will never do what you have called them to do."

The "voice" goes on to remind God that He is the One whose scorching breath shriveled the grass and the flowers. He is the One who brought punishment upon Israel and Judah. Why should *now* be any different?

"Here is your God!"

A new identity:

The prophet answers the skepticism of Jerusalem with the proclamation of a brand new identity:

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Isaiah 40:9 NIV [note]

Zion, bringer of good news, go up on a high mountain.

Jerusalem, bringer of good news, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"

Jerusalem has a new task and a new identity. She is now to be the bringer of glad tidings: God has come back. Jerusalem has built the highway for Him and He has returned. No longer will the city be ruled by earthly monarchs. No longer will its success be measured in terms of military might. Its warfare has ended.

Now, God will rule over His people. Jerusalem's new mission is to announce His Presence and invite the whole world to come to Him and experience His glory and splendor.

Endings/Transition/New Beginnings:

The high school graduate cannot find her new path until she leaves high school behind. And before she does discover her new identity, she will spend time in the wilderness of transition: lots of questions and very few answers.

Her new identity depends on building a “highway in the desert” of that in-between time.

Israel was to come to learn the same thing. In between its glory days of King David and the future glory of God’s coming King there was work to do: build a highway in the desert for our God.

The same is true for all of us as we go through the big transitions that life throws our way. The real work is done out in that “wilderness of transition.”

“Here is your God!”

Building a road in the desert is hard work. But it’s worth it! Bridges writes:

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“The gap between the old and the new is the time when innovation is most possible and when the organization [or person!] can most easily be revitalized.” (Bridges, p. 9)

That scary gap between the old and the new -- that no-man’s land without markers or boundaries – is the place where God does His greatest work. It is in that place that we change on the inside. It is there that we find our true identity.

No wonder, then, that Mark begins his Gospel – His Good News – by quoting Isaiah 40:3!

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Mark 1:3 NIV

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

It was there that Isaiah’s prophecy finally came true. It was there that God found the road in the desert ready for travel. It was there that God found willing, repentant hearts open to His presence. It was there that the Lord at last came to dwell with His people.

Our challenge: to build that road in the desert and make a path for God into our hearts. When we do, we will be able to proclaim: “Here is your God!”

LIFE Group Lesson for "Transition"

Ice Breaker

- Describe a time when you were faced with a change that required you discover a totally new identity. What did it feel like? What did you have to leave behind? What new things became a part of your life?

The two journeys:

- The Bible describes for us two journeys: one that takes us to God and one that takes away from God.
 - The journey that takes us *toward* God is the Exodus Journey.
 - The journey that takes us *away from* God is the Exile Journey.
- Exodus:
 - This was the journey that brought Israel out of slavery in a foreign land.
 - After 40 years of wandering in the Sinai Desert, Israel came to Canaan – the Promised Land.
- At the end of the Exodus journey, Moses warned Israel that if they did not remain faithful to God and His covenant with them, God would cause them to be taken away from the Promised Land:
 - The LORD would uproot them from their land and thrust them into another land. (Deuteronomy 29:28)
 - They would become exiles, cut off from both their land and their God.
- Moses goes on to say, however, that if Israel turned her heart back to God while in Exile, He would lead them on a new Exodus journey:
 - *Deuteronomy 30:1-3,5*
 - *When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come on you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all you heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you....He will bring you back to the land that belonged to your ancestors, and you will take possession of it.*

Isaiah's announcement:

- Isaiah's wonderful announcement in chapter 40 is nothing less than the proclamation of the end of exile and the beginning of a new Exodus.
 - Once again, it is a journey from the desert to the Promised Land.
 - Once again, it means that God will dwell with His people.
- Imagine what it must have felt like for both the Jews in exile and the Jewish survivors in devastated Judah to hear this news.
 - It meant that they would have to leave behind their way of seeing themselves and their land.
 - No longer would they be a little kingdom with its own army and power.
 - Now they would be something much more wonderful: the place where God would reveal Himself to the entire world!
- And ultimately, that is exactly what happened:
 - Mark quotes this passage in Isaiah at the beginning of his gospel of Jesus the King, the Son of God.

Our two journeys:

- Every one of us begins our spiritual journey in exile.
- When we come to faith in Jesus, we join God's People in the New Exodus Journey from the realm of sin and death to God's Kingdom of life and peace.
- And that means we experience a massive, ongoing transition from the old life to the new one that God is growing in us.
 - We may feel both excited and fearful, one day full of faith, the next day struggling with doubt.
 - We will face challenges and learn to rely more and more on God's strength and direction.
 - And bit by bit, we will realize that we are being "transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18 NIV)

Prayer time:

- Pray for each other in your Exodus journey.