

“Transitions”
Luke 2:41-52
1st Sunday after Christmas Day

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Westminster, Greenville
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One of my earliest memories of church comes from when I was 4 or 5 or 6 years old...it comes from the preacher of the church in which I grew up, in Michigan—and what I remember about this minister is that in his sermons, he liked to use examples from Charlie Brown comic strips.

This was an **BIG DEAL** for a 5 or 6-year-old boy.
The minister at my church read Charlie Brown, just like I read Charlie Brown!

Did any of you enjoy reading Charlie Brown?

If you did, you will recall, I'm sure, the football saga...how Charlie Brown kept trying to kick the football for 50 years, and how Lucy kept pulling the football away.

A few years ago, an article came out in which the author actually went back through all the Charlie Brown comics ever written to see if there was a consistent reason for Lucy pulling the ball away.

What he found was a variety of reasons, and some fascinating explanations:

- In 1966, it was physiological: a “ten-billion-to-one” muscle spasm, Lucy says to Charlie Brown.
- In 1974, it was philosophical: “In every program, Charlie Brown, there are always a few last-minute changes.”
- In 1975, it was psychological: “I’m not your mother, Charlie Brown.”
- And in 1980, it was biblical: “To everything there is a season...and a time to pull away the football.”

But the author also found an interesting twist.

In the late 1970's "there appeared a sequence of strips where Charlie Brown took seriously ill. When Lucy hears that Charlie Brown's return from the hospital is uncertain, she breaks down, realizes how much he means to her, and promises that she will INDEED let him kick the ball...if only he'll get better.

Then, in August of 1979, upon Charlie Brown's recovery, Lucy does something"...well, that she has never done before.

Lucy decides **not** to pull the ball away!
 She's going to let Charlie Brown kick the football!
 So what happens?
 Does anyone remember?

Charlie Brown...he runs up to kick the ball...and being Charlie Brown, he misses it—and he breaks Lucy's arm instead!¹

If you read Charlie Brown for 50 years, hoping that one day you'd finally get to see him kick that football...it never happened. Schulz himself once said that if he had let Charlie Brown kick the ball, it would not have been funny.

But I'm not sure that was the only reason.

When Schulz was approaching the end of his life, and in the hospital, he said to a friend:

"You control all these characters and the lives they live. You decide when they get up in the morning, when they're going to fight with their friends, when they're going to lose the game.

"Isn't it amazing how you have no control over your real life?"²

Now you and I may not be authors of a worldwide, bestselling comic strip.
 But I think we know what Schulz is talking about.

¹ Eric Schulmiller, "All Your Life, Charlie Brown. All Your Life. The complete history of Lucy's pulling the football away," *Slate*, 10-8-2014. The article can be found at www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/10/the_history_of_lucy_s_pulling_the_football_away_from_charlie_brown_in_peanuts.html.

² Sarah Boxer, "Charles M. Schulz, 'Peanuts' Creator, Dies at 77," *The New York Times*, February 14, 2000.

Our subject this morning is transitions.
How you and I deal with transitions in our lives.

It feels like an appropriate topic, as we stand two days away from the turn of a new calendar year.

Maybe some of you will reflect, over the next day or two, what this past year has meant for you.

Was it a good year? Was it a difficult year?

Did you lose a loved one?
Did you move to a new home?
Did one of your children get married?
Did the last of your grandchildren get married?

When you consider all the things that happened in your life this past year, how much control over the joys and the sorrows did you really have?

Our subject this morning is transitions.
How are you doing with the transitions in your life?

I raise the topic not just because of the new year that's approaching.
I raise it because of our text.

Our text for today is a story about Jesus growing up.
It's a story about Jesus' mother and father worrying about Jesus when Jesus was growing up.

It's a story about change and control and transition...

Luke is the only Gospel writer to tell this story.
Jesus is 12 years old, and his family is returning from the festival of the Passover in Jerusalem.

His parents assume that he is with the group that's traveling together, but when they cannot locate Jesus, they spend three days searching for him.

Finally, they find him in the Temple, “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.”

Jesus is impressive to the teachers, but not so much to his parents.

Mary exclaims:

“Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.”

To which Jesus replies, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”

How do you hear Jesus speaking those words?

Is it with gentleness in his voice?

Is it with a bit of sass in his voice?

How do you see the transition that Jesus’ family is going through at that moment?

I remember the story that Anne Lamott wrote about her teenage son.

He’s a grown man and a father now, but 12 years ago, when he was a teenager, Lamott tells about how her son had been driving their car too fast one day, hit a curb and ruined one of the tires. So Anne Lamott paid for the new tire, but as part of the repayment, she made her son wash both of their cars.

She went for a walk, got back, and the cars were still dirty.

She mentioned that the cars were still dirty.

“I washed them,” her son replied.

Anne Lamott called him a liar.

“I’m not a liar,” he said, holding up two dirty washrags.

“I just did a lousy job.”

At this, Anne Lamott lost it with her teenage boy, and a fight ensued. After the fight was over, Anne Lamott says that she was a puddle of tears, and she called her good friend, Father Tom.

She told him her side of the story, to which Father Tom replied:

“You’re right on schedule. And so is he. And I was worse.”

And then he added, “Mary and Joseph had some rough moments too.”³

So transitions can be hard, right?
Never mind the holy family.

How are you doing these days with whatever change or transition that life might be throwing your way?

A side note here: I hope you’re not hearing any of this as an indirect commentary on our family’s move to Greenville. We are, as I hope you’ve heard before, very grateful to be here. We have felt nothing but welcomed and appreciated by all of you.

The thing is, as I reflected recently on our past year, it occurred to me that one does not have to have made a major move in one’s life, in order to be dealing with major transitions in one’s life.

Maybe in the coming year, you will see your oldest child depart for college—how are you doing with that?

Maybe some of you are walking through that time of life
when you move from parenting your children
to parenting your parents—
how are you doing with that?

Maybe some of you are contemplating retirement.
Or perhaps you’re trying to decide whether to sell your house, and move into a retirement community.

Do you have all the answers?
Have you got it all figured out?

³ Anne Lamott, “My son, the stranger,” in salon.com, published May 22, 2006, found at https://www.salon.com/2006/05/22/lamott_fight_son/.

To end one stage of life, and walk through another door—it's RARELY easy. And all sorts of questions start to arise. Maybe you've asked one of these questions in the past year:

Where is God in the midst of the changes going on in my life?
 Will God give me what I need?
 Will I even know what I need?
 Is God leading the way?
 If God is leading the way, why do I sometimes feel afraid?

When dealing with any kind of change, I think it's helpful to sort out what God does and does not promise to give us.

Two things are never promised by God: CLARITY and CONTROL.

We don't get to see the future.
 We don't get to determine all that's going to happen.

It sounds disappointing—
 and yet, I think, it's not such a bad thing.

Do you remember, for example, the speech that King George VI made to England on Christmas Day, 1939?

He did not know, the country did not know, all the suffering and struggle that would lie ahead of them. They were still holding out hope that there might be peace sooner rather than later.

But King George VI also knew the threat that Hitler posed.
 And so he offered the following words to his country:

“A new year is at hand. We cannot tell which it will bring.
 If it brings peace how thankful we shall all be.
 If it brings continued struggle, we shall remain undaunted.

“In the meantime, I feel that we may all find a message of encouragement in the lines which, in my closing words, I would like to say to you.

And then he quoted a poem:

“ ‘I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year,
 ‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’

“And he replied, ‘Go out into the darkness
 and put your hand into the hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.’”⁴

Do you see what King George VI understood?

We don’t have to have control over our future, and we don’t have to have clarity about the future, in order to trust that the hand of God is at work in our future....

Let’s look again at our text.

There’s this one word in what he said that caught my attention.

The word...is “must”.
 I must be in my Father’s house.

Must be...like Jesus didn’t so much choose to go back to the Temple as it was chosen for him. Like he had to go back. Like he was CALLED to go back.

I must be in my Father’s house.

The reason that word caught my attention is the OTHER place it shows up in Luke’s Gospel.

In chapter 9, Jesus tells the disciples:

“The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed....”

⁴ A copy of the text of King George VI’s speech can be found in many places, including, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Christmas_Message,_1939.

Must undergo great suffering...
 Must undergo... as if there is no choice.
 Why no choice?
 Because Jesus was called by God to do this.

And I think there's a message in that for us.
 God does not promise us clarity. God does not promise control.
 What God gives us, during times of transition, is a CALL.

And I don't mean one calling, once in our lives.
 I mean different callings, at different times in our lives.

Look at the many different calls in Jesus' life... called to be obedient to his parents, then called to be a carpenter, then called to a ministry of healing and preaching and teaching, then called to go to the cross...

Perhaps Jesus is calling you to be a different person and parent, now that you have an empty nest, from the kind of parent you were when you had a full nest.

Perhaps you are one of three siblings, and your aging parents need help, and your other two siblings aren't able to help or don't seem to want to help the way you think your parents need help. So you find yourself needing to be more patient, taking on more responsibility... maybe you're called to be a different kind of sibling at this time in your life.

No matter what transition we're going through,
 I believe that God gives each of us a CALLING,
 a job to do,
 at this particular place in this particular time.

There was a church conference that took place well over 20 years ago.
 The topic was HIV/AIDS—ministry for people with this disease.

This was in the earlier days of the disease, when AIDS was feared by many, misunderstood by many.

In our prayer time we asked for Jesus to show us the way he wanted us to go.

“Well, the very next week, one of the women came and told us that she had met a young man in her apartment building who was dying of AIDS.

The young man had been forsaken by his family.
He had no one.

“She’d been visiting him, doing some light cleaning around his apartment, running errands when he was too ill to go out.

“That’s where we came in. We realized that Jesus was calling us to be representative grandmothers for people suffering from this illness.

From that point on, each of us adopted someone with AIDS,
and we now serve as that person’s grandmother.”

The woman then looked squarely at the speaker.

“Ma’am,” she said, “I’ll admit this is a little thing.
It’s an ORDINARY thing—
nothing as impressive as all you talk
about—

but it is something we could do...so we have done it.”⁵

I’d like you to do something for me.

I’d like you to put your hand in the air if you believe there’s something you can do, something you’re called to do—some little thing, some ordinary thing—that God might be calling you to do to share God’s light and God’s love.

Good.

⁵ I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for this story, which I believe originated with the Rev. Dr. Will Willimon.

Now take that hand, and in the next day or two, make sure you put it in the hand of God. It's the most faithful way for all of us to begin the coming year.

Amen.