

August 29, 2010
Ecclesiastes 3:1-13
Isaiah 6:1-8
Luke 14:1, 7-11
2 Corinthians 5:17-20
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16 "What's Next?"
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Well, here we are...after 2 years and a ton of words, songs, prayers, moments of silence, disagreements, "aha" moments, tears and laughter, meetings, classes, and coffee hours. I want to thank a lot of people for what they have done during this time, but if I start naming names, I'll inadvertently leave someone out, and then I'll have to apologize, and that's kind of messy, so I'll just say THANK YOU to everybody, and leave it at that. You have all been my teachers, and I would *like* to say that I have learned a lot, and grown a lot, and I have a lot of great memories that I will treasure in the future.

I know I am going to be asked about my immediate future plans; all I know so far is that I am going to take a month or so of vacation time. I do not have another interim position waiting for me, but I am actively looking, and I'll let you all know what happens on that front. I will attend my 40th high school class reunion next month, and THAT will be very interesting. Maybe even kind of scary...you know: classmates I probably will not recognize, an ex-girlfriend will be there with her husband; ...OK, TMI....

Anyway, onward to what may pass as a sermon.... Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 is one of my favorite texts in the Bible.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace. ...I know that there is nothing better for (the workers) than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil.

What caught my attention was the truth that in God's providence we were brought together for a particular kind of journey together. You had never before experienced it, so that in itself added a lot of uncertainty, 'juice', electricity. Plus we were mixing denominational identities, theological viewpoints and language, and styles of church government (polity), so we all went through a steep learning curve. We experienced what felt like birthing and dying. There was some combat, as well as some embracing; weeping and laughing; anxiety and enjoyment; some healing as well as further wounding; and I imagine some of us really wanted more silence rather than more words.

Out of all that, it is true that you have come a long way in your self-understanding. You have further to go - I refer less to your search for your next minister, than to what kind of community you are becoming, and how you will live into your true use in the world.

As it is now time to separate and go our own ways, we will experience to a greater or lesser degree the grieving process. It's the season for that to happen - we must deal with loss before we can establish another relationship. But along with loss is also doing what is in front of us to do, and anticipation about what is next. May we enjoy that doing, may we take pleasure in it, knowing that the Lord is in our midst for good. We will be moving on with the Lord whose very nature is dynamic rather than static.

My prayer is that as we move on into our next adventures, we will live into the last verse of the text: *"I know that there is nothing better for (the workers) than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil."* Life is too short to stay grumpy for long, and God is larger than we think.

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

My question is, "What's a 'pivot'?" Anyway, this is my favorite 'call passage' in the Bible, because it portrays a magnificent vision; but mostly because it tells me that the Lord needs ordinary average imperfect people to get involved in the divine business, and that the Lord empowers us to hear his voice and respond. So that means you, and me. It isn't always easy to discern what God is up to, but God is very creative and finds ways to break through the fog so that we can see and hear and understand. Then it's up to us to respond.

Isaiah was so taken by his vision and the new lightness of his being that he blurted out his willingness to jump in and go with whatever God had in mind. Which of course is a big deal because it involves a leap of faith that leaves us learning how to fly; but it is the only way to go, really, in light of the Lord's never-ending love for us. We get way too serious – OK, *I* get way too serious – about how *WE* are going to make sure church and faith and community survive and even thrive, especially during an interim time. We find out that God's sending means that we don't go alone, or without enough resources. And we find out that this is not *OUR* church; it belongs to the One who called it into being in the first place.

We are invited, as Isaiah was invited, to co-create with God the beloved community in the image of the Heavenly City, rather than in our own image. Which means that we have to let go of the self-centeredness that blinds and deafens us to what God has in mind. Which takes time, patience, and the willingness to sacrifice our own agendas, because, in the end, it is *NOT* about the "I", it's about the "us".

So let's sing about it: *Hymn: "Here I am, Lord".

Luke 14:1, 7-11

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely...When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Guess what? You and I have been invited to a party, a banquet, by a host who has absolutely no interest in who gets there firstest with the mostest. It's about making room for all who want in, not

about who gets to tell others what to do because they are more important. The Lord has no use for that sense of entitlement that is more interested in how cozy one is with the host than with warmly welcoming the newcomer. It's not about being seen. It's about showing up and making sure that everyone who comes has what they need of the abundance that is provided for all. It is the Lord's banquet, and all of us are the Lord's guests. That makes us all very important and special, and it also makes us very equal and ordinary. That way we can all enjoy the feast to the utmost, because we are paying attention to the right thing – our neighbor, and his or her enjoyment.

2 Corinthians 5:17-20

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

This is my all-time favorite, because when I was a brand new Christian it spoke to my experience of being changed from the inside out. And as time went on, and I struggled to hold on to the 'everything has become new' part, because I became aware that there was more and more in me that needed renewing, it remained my favorite because it spoke to the hope I had in the Lord's ability to regenerate me.

The baseline is a dual truth: in the Lord we are made new, and we are given the privilege of sharing that newness with our world. The old has passed away, is passing away, and will pass away, making room for the new Self. It is an uneven process, for we are complex beings who need a lot of work. And despite our incompleteness, or perhaps because of it, we are entrusted with sharing our convictions and our struggles with those who cross our path.

That begins here as you continue to build a strong community that understands that regeneration is a continuous process. The movement from unconscious incompetence to conscious competence is at work within your midst. Continue to build one another up, to encourage one another, to heal wounds and build bridges. Hold one another accountable in love. Trust one another. Accept one another as you wish to be accepted.

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16:

Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. ...Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

I believe that we have been angels to one another. Strangers who developed a relationship of hospitality that allowed us to see one another's humanity, accept it, and learn from it. We have done that in the presence of the Lord, of whom it is said, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

Now we are no longer strangers, but friends, and companions in the Lord. That relationship will continue despite our separated paths. We can pray for one another, and wish the best for one another, so that we are angels to one another from a distance.

Patient Trust in Ourselves & The Slow Work Of God,
by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

*Above all, trust in the slow work of God.
We are all, quite naturally,
impatient in everything to reach the end
without delay.
We should like to skip
the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being
on the way to something unknown,
something new,
and yet it is the law of all progress
that is made by passing through
some stages of instability-
and that it may take a very long time.*

*And so I think it is with you.
Your ideas mature gradually –
let them grow,
let them shape themselves,
without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today
what time (that is to say, grace and
circumstances acting on your own good will)
will make you tomorrow.*

*Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you
and accept the anxiety of
feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.*

*Above all, trust in the slow work of God,
our loving vine-dresser.*

Amen.