

A Way in the Wilderness
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
May 30, 2021 First Sunday after Pentecost
Isaiah 43:16, 18-19; Revelation 21:1-5a; John 20:7-22a

Call to Worship: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this First Sunday after Pentecost.

Pentecost celebrates the Holy Spirit's work in nature, in Jesus and in us, sparking creativity, growth and evolution toward the realm of God on earth.

Today we will hear God say to people who were going through the hardest of times,

Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

The Holy Spirit helps us find a way through hard times to emerge into new and greater life, but even a good change can be stressful. The outer path of change is paralleled by an inner journey through emotional responses and mental shifts. We end an old way of being and go through a potentially painful time of adjustment and growth before we emerge into new life. The classic metaphor for this inner journey is the children of Israel leaving Egypt, wandering in the wilderness and finally crossing into the Promised Land.

Transition is the technical word for this three-stage inner process that it takes to adapt to outer change.

We are caught up in the flow of huge changes and transitions right now as a planet, a nation, a church and individuals. We need understanding and skill in order to find our way to the Promised Land. Today we will take some steps on that journey. Let us worship together and walk by faith...

[the sermon begins below]

A Way in the Wilderness

God proclaims in Isaiah, “I am about to do a new thing.... I will make a way in the wilderness.” The Book of Revelation talks about a new heaven and a new earth. God says, “See, I am making all things new.”

This is the nature of the Spirit flowing through the universe that people have observed for thousands of years. The Spirit moves in all life making a way to help beings survive and thrive. Look at the pandemic virus mutations as one example, and the inspired mobilization against that virus as another.

Humans pass through developmental stages as individuals and as a species. The Spirit does new things, calling us to undergo metanoia, to move beyond our level of consciousness and evolve toward the ability to establish the realm of God on earth.

Humans are created to learn and grow and change, and yet we are also created to love our routines and find comfort in the familiar.

We are both naturally resilient and naturally resistant to change. It is a healthy balance, it encourages stability, but our resistance can block us from accepting and adapting when the Spirit needs to do a new thing.

Many reforms have failed because people couldn't make the inner transition to a new way of being. We have set out to leave slavery in Egypt, but turned back when we faced the discomfort of the wilderness of change. We have lost the way that the Spirit opened before us. We have lacked the inner skills needed to reach the Promised Land.

The good news is that in the past fifty years the Spirit has helped humanity increase its mastery of inner transition, largely thanks to the work of William Bridges, the organizational consultant who wrote the book *Managing Transitions*. It was a central text when I was trained in interim ministry.

Today I will not have time to give a full introduction to transition, but I'm sure I will return to it again. We are living in one of the greatest times of upheaval in human history, and while some of those changes are immediate, like emerging from the pandemic, others have no end in sight, like the wide-ranging effects of the climate crisis and our responses to them.

Understanding transitions is crucial to managing them successfully. So let's look at one that we as a congregation are facing.

I'm happy to announce that the Church Council has set July 4th as the date for regathering in the sanctuary. We will return to a beloved, familiar space, but remember that even a positive change requires an inner transition through an ending, a chaotic wilderness and a new beginning, and our regathering will be full of changes.

A significant portion of our congregation has been worshipping and sharing our lives together on Zoom for fourteen months. We have developed a streamlined worship service and expanded our time of Joys and Concerns to let everyone speak. We have formed relationships that are like a close-knit family, sharing things that are meaningful to us, stepping into one another's homes and lives.

But another significant portion of our congregation has not participated in those Zoom gatherings. The church they know and love means a more elaborate way of worship and less broad and deep Joys and Concerns.

Not only will these two congregations be going through a major change to come back to the sanctuary, but the change will be compounded by different pandemic experiences and post-pandemic expectations. Then there will be other changes. Children and some members of our congregation will be unvaccinated, so we will be wearing masks.

Also, the Church Council places a high value on the ability of all people to be part of Joys and Concerns, wherever they are, so there will be a flat screen TV for that part of Sunday morning, and we will continue the new format of shorter worship followed by longer sharing.

We also want everyone to have access to the service, so we will continue to stream it live on Zoom and record and post it. That means there will be a new laptop, camera and microphone in the sanctuary. The Council wants to make the technology unobtrusive, but still it will be different.

The wisdom of William Bridges tells us that this complex change will not be complete until people have completed their inner transition at their own pace through their own emotional responses. Everyone will make the journey their own way, but all of us need to go through the same three stages.

First, we need to acknowledge the endings. I will be happy to be back in the sanctuary, but I will be sad not to sit virtually in your homes and see your puppies. I will be grateful for the extended Joys and Concerns, but I will miss parts of the pre-pandemic service.

Processing endings frees us to enter the second stage: the wilderness. There we may feel lost or anxious because the old way will have ended and we won't be accustomed to the new, and it may not go smoothly at first.

If we do a skillful job of managing these first two stages, at last we will enter the Promised Land. The new way will become simply how we do church, and we will learn to love it.

To be skillful at transition begins with understanding each stage, and knowing what helps.

We need to offer opportunities to express our feelings about the endings. We need to find the way in the wilderness that the Spirit makes that feels less chaotic and more creative, less anxious and more exciting, less disturbing and more normal. And eventually we need to find ways to celebrate who we have become as we cross into the Promised Land.

It helps to have a clear sense of purpose for change, like a shared commitment to include everyone now that we have seen how this technology and extended Joys and Concerns can help us through hard times.

It helps people to know the plans for the change and be able to picture exactly how they will work, and what our part will be.

The story of Easter in the Gospel of John begins with the disciples grieving an ending. Then they enter the wilderness when Mary Magdalene says that Jesus has risen from the dead. They feel hopeful, yet also anxious and troubled by doubt. Then Jesus appears, breathes the Spirit into them, gives them peace and power and sends them out with new purpose and identity, filled with joy.

This is what we hope for our upcoming transition: to become more effective, joyful instruments of the Spirit's peace and power—to be transformed so that we can transform the world.

Let us pray in silence, aware of our feelings in all the transitions we are undergoing in our lives, asking for the Spirit to make a way in the wilderness ahead...

A Haiku by Mel Goertz:

A Black bear walked up
the driveway, steady gait
past the kitchen window.