

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 26—Year B
Deuteronomy 6:1-9
Psalm 119:1-8
Hebrews 9:11-14
Mark 12:28-34

Transition. It seems like everywhere we look, things are in **transition**. **Change** is upon us from every direction—some of our **own choosing**, some **unfolding** quite **naturally**, some thrust upon us by our **indecision** because *not to choose is itself a choice*.

There are **big transitions**, like **climate change**, very much on our radar this week as the **summit** is getting ready to happen in **Glasgow, Scotland**. A **summit** that will call us to observe with **diligence** and **discipline** the **command to steward and care for the earth well** if we are to *avert chain reactions with dire consequences* for the **planet and its inhabitants**.

There are the **smaller transitions unfolding** with such **beauty across our mountains** as we watch the **trees surrender their leaves** and willingly taken on a **barrenness**, an **emptiness**, knowing that this too is **essential for new life** to make its way to the surface when the time is right.

COVID has been **one big long case study** in navigating **change** and **transition**, a **wilderness land** to be sure for which none of us has had a roadmap.

At **every corner of our culture**, it feels like we are in **transition**, crossing from a **known landscape** to one that feels **foreign**, whether that be on matters of **race**, or **gender and sexuality**, or **politics**, or how you **feel about masks and vaccines**. *It all feels like the ground is shifting out from under our feet*.

And amidst all of these more **collective transitions**, there are the much more **personal ones**. **Shifting relationships**, **changes in jobs**, **children growing up**, **aging bodies with increased limitations**, **illness in ourselves or those we love**, even **dying**—*in every way imaginable, we are a people in transition*.

Change is **hard** and **scary** and **unsettling**, and so it was for **our ancestors in the faith**.

In **Deuteronomy 6**, the **people of God** are **preparing to cross over into the promised land**, *a land that Moses himself won't get to set foot in*, and **Moses** is handing off some **crucial teaching** that will **guide God's people in this land that they are about to cross into and occupy**. This teaching was to **keep them**, and **their children**, and **their children's children in the ways of God** so that **their life may be long**, so that it **may go well with them**, so that they can **multiply** and **thrive in this land flowing with milk and honey**, *just as God has promised them*.

Here's what **Moses** says: **Shema, Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.**

This passage from **Deuteronomy 6** is known as the **Shema**. It serves as the **centerpiece** of the **morning and evening Jewish prayer services**. It's **traditional for Jews to say the Shema as their last words before dying**, and **for parents to teach their children to say it before they go to sleep at night**.

For **thousands of years**, *these words* have **anchored a people**. They are **poetic and powerful and balm to the soul**. And *this week*, it hit me how **timely** they are.

The **people of God** are given these words **for the land that they are about to cross into and occupy**. The *Shema* was to be **their anchor in a time of profound transition**, and that's **the space we occupy today as a people**. *We are always crossing over into and occupying a new land all the way to our last breath*.

Sometimes that **new land will be full of milk and honey**, and sometimes it will feel **unfamiliar and hard**, but we have to remember that, *even for the people of God*, it wasn't **all milk and honey in the new land**, but there was a **lot of struggle and losing their way**, too.

And the **question Deuteronomy puts before us** is this: As you **move through this transition**, as you **occupy a new space**, *what is essential to carry with you?* And the **answer given** is this: **The LORD is our God, the LORD alone**. **Love God, love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might**. *That's it*. **Keep this in your heart**. **Speak of this over and over to your kids**. **Talk about it at home, talk about it when you're away, talk about when you lie down and when you get up**. **Put reminders everywhere**—on your **hand**, on your **forehead**, on your **doorposts**, on your **gates**—everywhere you can think of to remind you of **the one essential thing you've got to hold onto—only God is God, love God with everything you've got, your whole being**.

When the **ground beneath your feet is shifting**, *come back to this*, and *let this* anchor you to what truly **matters**. Let this **guide you in the strange new land you are occupying**.

Jesus picks this up, and **carries it one step more**. It's *not really* that he's **making a new commandment** because what he says is **all over the Hebrew scriptures**, but what **Jesus did so powerfully and beautifully** was **distill it down to its core**.

When he was asked, **“Which commandment is the first of all?”** Jesus answered, **“The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’”** That's the *Shema*, which any good Jew would know by heart. And *then*, Jesus went on: **“The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”**

“Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (which was included in the Hebrew notion of soul), **“and with all your strength AND love your neighbor as your yourself. That's it. There isn't any commandment, rule, guidance, ethic, value greater than these.”**

Using an image from **mystic and Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault's** work, **Jesus** reminds us that **our love has to be aligned vertically to God alone and horizontally across time and space extending to our neighbor**. *In other words*, **love has to permeate every single aspect of our living**.

Stop for a moment and think...what transitions are you living through right now? What are the **sea changes upon you**—at the **big societal level**, at the **deeply interpersonal level**, in the **rumblings known only in your own soul**? What are the **lands that you are crossing over into and preparing to occupy**? And *as you move through these changes*, **what are you carrying with you?** What are you **being asked to leave behind?** What needs to **recede** and what are you **being asked to bring forward?**

And amidst this inventory, how are you prioritizing the one thing that is essential to your ability to thrive? How are you carrying your commitment to love? How is your heart tending to your loving of God? How is your soul breathing this love? How is your mind nurturing it? How is your strength persevering in it? And how are you manifesting love to your neighbor? How are you understanding your communion with them? And how are you showing this love to your very own self?

To remember that *none* of the other things in *this* world, *none* of them are God; to come back home to LOVE—love of God, love of neighbor—this is our anchor, this is our north star, this is our guiding light, this is the one thing that will see us through all this flux.

Life is really complicated right now, and often hard, but God through Moses and Jesus make it really simple—bring this love to your awareness when you rise and when you lie down, and make it a point to put reminders of it throughout your day.

Anchor yourself in this love, and it won't matter if you are in the land of milk and honey *or* the way is just plain hard, anchored in this love, *you will be living in the promised land.*

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October 31, 2021