

A Transition Sermon at Advent Church in Hatboro
The Rev. Lou Temme
Sept. 28, 2014

Text: I want to use as a text a few lines from the third chapter of the Book of Ecclesiastes that mention transition times in life.

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;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew.....

This scripture records and acknowledges the many transitions that everyday life goes through. In many cases the transitions involve a good bit of mixed emotions of happiness and sadness on the part of those who are involved in them. This is definitely a day of mixed emotions for me.

I am excited and proud that Advent is about to begin a new chapter in its history that will address many of its pressing goals and concerns. I am sad that I will have to let go of the working partnership I have formed with the congregation and your leaders that has enabled me to be with you in this journey and to express my gifts in ministry.

One thing that was clear in May 2013 when I agreed to be your rector for the interim period is that this would be a time limited experience with an abrupt ending. Now, the final week has come.

Together and separately we have done a lot of transitioning. You have examined the previous 25 year chapter in this parish's life, studied the state of the parish at this point in its history, reconsidered your relationship to the retired rector and the lay leaders who accompanied you in the past, and now you are about to begin a ministry together with a new clergyperson that you have chosen.

I came here from a part-time interim assignment with one of the smallest congregations in the Diocese that worships in a building that is far too big and too costly to maintain. It tries to do ministry in a very dynamic environment within an increasingly international university student body and a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. Tides of diversity and secularism wash all around its foundations. The small group of congregational leaders continually faces a host of serious survival questions.

Advent Church has very different challenges. It is set among a series of residential communities that are much more stable and where the population has not and is not predicted to change very much for the foreseeable future. One big issue at Advent is the size of the congregation and its leadership core, but fortunately is not at the same time burdened by a building that is too big or too old. Advent can rightly hope to move from the stability and

routine of a long time pastor to the new possibilities and congregational growth that a new leader may inspire.

I want to thank all of you for the support and encouragement that I have received as your interim pastor. I always felt that this was an open congregation where I had many opportunities and gifts to contribute to the parish's transition experience.

Now that our time together is ending, you have the opportunity to begin a new chapter of ministry and I leave enjoying the fact that I was able to maintain this ship on an even keel for the last year and a half allowing your discernment and search committee to work productively and rapidly toward selecting the next rector.

Standing behind all of the changes and transitions we both have had to make is a God of goodness who calls forth our best and entrusts to us many gifts for ministry and for community building and for healthy change.

These personal gifts are ours to be employed and not squandered. I think I see many of you "as raring to go" to make a concerted effort to tackle Advent Church's challenges and help Advent Church achieve its potential.

The days ahead will be filled with lots of newness. People will be developing their own relationship with the new pastor. Many times the question may come up, "why not ask Lynn what she thinks, what she wants, what she would like to see happen." In fact I have heard these phrases for several months now from both members and leaders.

These are good questions to ask, as Lynn is about to be at the heart of the parish's leadership. However, she will also be asking similar questions of you – what would be good for Advent Church, what does this parish need, what is essential for this parish's health and longevity, what does Advent Church want to do for and in its surrounding communities as well as for the larger world.

All of these are important questions and you will get to struggle out the answers together.

There is an Episcopal priest named Arlin Rothage who has written extensively about how to understand parishes and how parishes handle their times of transition. He says that every congregation has seasons of life that are akin to the human lifespan – namely a beginning, a middle, and an end. Moreover he writes that sometimes in the life span of a settled parish there appear rare opportunities to restart the life span process, to take an established congregation with a long history back to its youth again, to rejuvenate its membership and renew its ministry to the community.

Our faith tradition has many visual images for this sort of rebirth. We have listened this summer to the tale of the Hebrews' exodus journey, which took them from a restricted life in a foreign country to a new land where they enjoyed the freedom to build a new nation. We recall also the resurrection of Jesus from death to life and the giving of the Holy Spirit to the depressed and grieving disciples that transformed them into the courageous founders of the Christian movement.

In some denominations, the process of congregational rebirth begins with the arrival of a single charismatic minister, and in other denominations it begins when an intentional joint effort is made by the lay and clergy leadership of a parish to turn over a new leaf and begin a new push toward vitality. In the Episcopal tradition, it is more likely to be this latter method, where many different lay people along with a gifted minister are involved in a partnership to foster the health and vitality of the church. Advent Church is fortunate that the coming chapter of parish life will possess both these ingredients for renewal.

Nevertheless, one cannot emphasize enough that a successful ministry with your new rector will only be possible if everyone identifies and invests the spiritual gifts that you could

give at this time. Many of you have never been invited to share what you have to give to God's work in and through this place. But everyone will have to be on the transformation train for this church's story to have a dramatic rebirth for the better.

I am reminded of a story of the woman who tended the garden in the front of her home. It was filled with beautiful flowering plants.

One day along came the local pastor and approached her.

The pastor paused, leaned over the fence, and said, "Isn't it wonderful what God can do in a garden?"

And the woman responded, "You should have seen it when God had it all to himself."

In the same spirit, I invite you all to be a part of the creation of the new chapter in Advent Church's life. Make a contribution big or small of your time and talents and treasure to the blossoming of Advent Church. Each and every one of you is important. You count. Good things will happen if you get behind them.

When I arrived in May 2013, it was not hard to notice that Robin's retirement signaled a pause in this church's life. Fortunately, a discernment and search committee was being assembled and hit the ground running last September. These folks worked tirelessly and expeditiously and maintained confidentiality for the last year.

Meanwhile I worked with your dedicated and caring leaders and vestry and made many small and significant adjustments in different areas of parish life, especially worship, administration, and the parish's tempo and tone. The goal was always to facilitate the normal parish transition issues like letting the past and your previous rector go and preparing the way for a new minister.

A core of committed Church members and staff has been at the heart of all this work. However, moving forward, lots more people will need to be involved, all with their particular contribution to the journey ahead. Moreover, if all of this energy and talent can be managed and organized well, things will go in the right direction and yield a pleasant result - a fruitful garden vineyard characterized by a rebirth of local ministry.

You have experienced a period of transition, one that comes to every parish when a long time minister retires. But now you stand at the beginning of a new season in time.

I invite you to affirm that in spite of all the uncertainty we have experienced it is God that has led Advent Church this far! Moreover, I invite you to trust that God will continue to walk with you as you change this parish's direction firmly toward a new and positive future. I pray that God's peace and God's presence may be with the people of Advent Church always.

Amen