

THE GOD OF LIFE'S TRANSITIONS

(Reading Acts 8-11)

Many of us are familiar with going to a camp or a retreat or a conference such as this to find spiritual refreshment and renewal. Several core ideas are at play here.

- The one dimension is to get out of our normal spaces in order to meet with God in a different place. For some in the history of Christianity this has meant going to the desert.¹
- The other, is to have time out, away from our normal routines and responsibilities. This is to move into a Sabbath spirituality.²
- A further dimension, is to find a time for silence and to practice solitude,³ although within the Protestant tradition we tend to fill our retreats rather than that we create spaces for emptiness and reflection.
- And finally and ideally, we go to a camp, a retreat or a conference in order to gain some revelatory moment.⁴ We hope for some encounter that will enrich or even change some of the everyday and often routine dimensions of our lives. In other words, we would like to hear something from the Spirit by way of guidance or inspiration.

In order for this to become a possibility, we may need to rethink some of the dominant images that we have of God and recast some of the ideas that we have of the way God works in our lives. There are a number of challenges here.

- The one is that we have a static view of God. The all-powerful God is fully self-contained, perfect and immovable. God does not need us.
- The other is that we see God in wholly distant and detached ways. God is not attentive to us. And hence we have a crisis of prayer in the present-day church.

In contrast to these, and similar views, we propose that a Trinitarian view of God suggests that God is profoundly inwardly and outwardly relational. In the words of Karl Barth, God is not only Wholly Other but is also Wholly Concerned. And rather than thinking of God as only confined to temple or church – and as such, as the God of the predictable spaces, we need to see God in the tabernacle and on the road with his people. Thus we need to engage in a spirituality of the journey. In fact, in this presentation we are suggesting that God is also the God of transitional spaces, and as such, is more the God of surprises than the God of familiarity. We may even think of God as the Migrant God.⁵

¹See H. Waddell, transl. *The Desert Fathers*. Vintage Spiritual Classics. New York: Vintage Books, 1998, and B. C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

² See A. Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's and the Sabbath*. New York: Harper and Row, 1950, and M. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

³ See H. Nouwen, *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on Solitude, Celibacy, Prayer and Contemplation*. New York: Image Books, 1979, and C. Ringma, *Hear the Heart Beat with Henri Nouwen: Reflections on the Way of the Seeking Heart*. Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2014.

⁴ For but two examples of such revelatory impacts see Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*. Penguin Classics. Transl. C. Wolters. London: Penguin, 1966, and E. Cousins, transl. *Bonaventure: The Life of St. Francis*. Harper Collins Spiritual Classics. New York: HarperOne, 2005.

⁵ See A. Gorospe, "What Does the Bible Say about Migration? Three Approaches to the Biblical Text" in *God at the Borders: Globalization, Migration and Diaspora*. Eds. C. Ringma, K. Hollenbeck-Wuest, & A. Gorospe (Manila: OMF Lit. 2015) pp.152-159

There are many places in Scripture where we can pick up this theme. We need only think of the intermediate zone between Israel's cry to Yahweh for deliverance and the actual time of crossing the Red Sea. Key in this intermediate zone was the preparation of Moses for his leadership role. And in a symbolically similar way, between Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his ministry, lie his forty days in the wilderness (Luke 3: 21 - 4: 1-15).

The segment of Scripture we wish to concentrate on is Acts 8-11, which marks the transition from the Jerusalem based church (Acts 1-7) to the faith community being scattered and the more formal impulse of the mission to the Gentiles begins (Acts 13).⁶ We wish to look at some important themes in these chapters and then draw a range of practical implications that you may wish to take on board for more personal reflection.

But one prior observation. This is particular way of reading Scripture. In our Protestant, and particularly the Evangelical way of reading Scripture, we have a tendency to focus on individual passages with the danger of losing the bigger picture. This in contrast is a narrative reading of Scripture which does not fragment but calls for integration.⁷ And as such, this calls us to place ourselves in this narrative so that it becomes suggestive and relevant for our lives. And why do we need this? Because it is only a compelling over-arching narrative that can provide us with an alternative vision of living life, in contrast, but in dialogue with, the narrative of our current instrumental and utilitarian secular culture.

Into the narrative then. And let's start at the beginning. In the earlier chapters of Acts we read about the ascension of Christ, the Pentecost event, the formation of the church along communalistic lines, the apostolic witness to the Jewish nation and its leaders, the stoning of Stephen and the beginning of persecution resulting in the church being scattered far and wide (Acts 8:1).

This is followed by Philip's mission to Samaria, the involvement of Peter and John, and the joyous Samaritan Pentecost (Acts 8:15-16).

This brings us to our focus, Acts 8-11, and the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), the transformation of Saul, the enemy of the faith (Acts 9:1-30) and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the household of the Cornelius, the Roman centurion (Acts 9:32-11:18).

These three conversion narratives function in a particular way in Luke's Acts. They are transitional accounts. And they take place in the messy middle of the early church moving from its Jerusalem centre "to the ends of the earth" as prophesied by the Risen Lord (Acts 1:8). Thus these three narratives occur in the midst of a major paradigm shift. They take place as the old is about to unfold into the new. The messy middle is also where we find ourselves from time to time.⁸ So let's in our imagination enter into these narratives and draw some implications.

⁶ I am deeply indebted for many of the core ideas of this presentation to my colleague from Asian Theological Seminary, Manila. See N. Mendoza, "Faith at the Border, Faith on the Move: Migrations, Transitions and Transformations in Acts 8-11" in *God at the Borders*. pp.251-267.

⁷ S. Hauerwas & L. G. Jones, eds. *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997 and M. Golberg, *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001.

⁸ We could also say that this is where we find ourselves all the time since we live "between the times" of the first and second coming of Christ. Or in the words of one missiologist "we are too late for the world and too early for heaven."

1. What is overwhelmingly clear in these narratives is that this is not the result of an apostolic grand plan for church growth and mission expansion. This is the Spirit of God drawing ordinary members and leaders of the early church into a zone or sphere that is well beyond their planning and comprehension - hence the constant references to the Spirit guiding (Acts 8:26, 8:29), and the power of visions and dreams (Acts 9:4-5, 9:10, 10:3-6, 10:11-16). The scenario here is not of a confident church marching into the world. Rather, it is possibly the reluctant but certainly the perplexed followers of Jesus being drawn outside of their comfort zones. The implications here for us are staggering and challenging-
 - let's begin with the basic question whether in our post-Christendom world the call to first world re-evangelisation means that we too need to be pulled out of our comfort zones?
 - and leading on, are we far too rationalistic and programmatic and need to become much more Spirit-sensitive?
 - and further, are we willing to live the Christian life and serve in the world with a far greater level of ambiguity rather than the present certainties that we hold so dearly?
 - and finally, what do we think of Karl Rahner's provocative statement: that unless we have a mystical encounter with Christ our beliefs forged in our secular age won't be enough to sustain us?
2. What is also clear in these three narratives is that they function as stepping stones. They are preparatory. They lie in-between the birth of the Jerusalem church and the full-blown mission to the Gentile world with Antioch as the new base (Acts 13). Thus these accounts are embryonic and provisional but they also contain a certain DNA. They are provisional in the sense that they don't give us a pattern for how to reach out to others. But the DNA is clear. We are to be a Spirit led people open to the miraculous and the mysterious and we are to discern the way the Spirit is calling us to engage in our world. Two implications follow-
 - stepping stones are God's gentle way with us. We are not thrown in at the deep end.
 - but we have to be willing to take the risks of provisionality rather than only the moves of certainty.
3. We have called these three accounts transitional. This means there is movement - movement from the known old to the unexpected new. This is usually not too comfortable for anyone. It was not easy for Saul who seems to be a bit of an anal personality and a control freak, to trust the strange way this Jesus was dealing with him. But trust is a key theme in these narratives and this poses challenges for us in the following ways-
 - our modern socialisation orients us towards autonomy, self-sufficiency and self-determination. We are not all that sure about the art of being led by the Spirit.
 - and trust calls us to vulnerability and humility, qualities that tend to be scarce in our contemporary culture.
4. Scholars have pointed out that these three narratives can be read through the lens of the work of A. Van Gennup and his notion of the move from structure to deconstruction to re-

integration⁹ and that of Victor Turner and his paradigm of order/structure with its move to liminality and in-betweenness leading to the need for re-integration or *communitas*.¹⁰

This lens helps us to make greater sense of these three conversion narratives-

A] They occur in out of the way places – away from the Jerusalem centre where most of the action has been.

B] The Eunuch, Saul and Cornelius are high status people but they are in places of marginality. The Eunuch did not find faith in Jerusalem and would have been excluded from the temple because of his Gentile and sexual status (Deuteronomy 23:1). Instead, he finds faith in a desert place (Acts 8:26). Saul does not receive a Christ encounter at the stoning of Stephen in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1) but on the lonely road to Damascus. And Cornelius despite his religiosity and goodness (Acts 10:2-4) is still an outsider to the faith. Thus these narratives reflect in-between spaces and the reality of liminality. The three in this strange space become candidates for transformation. And we read of their various encounters with Christ through the Spirit (Acts 8:36; Acts 9:17; Acts 10:44-48).

C] But it is not only the Eunuch, Saul and the Centurion who are in in-between and liminal spaces, so are Philip, Ananias and the apostle Peter. They are all out of their comfort zones, they all needed to be prodded along, they all need to be guided and impelled by the Spirit (Acts 8:26; Acts 9:10-19; Acts 10:9-16). To varying degrees they all needed to be changed as well. Philip has to embrace a black man, Ananias an enemy of the church, and Peter a Roman Gentile soldier. Thus both the evangelists and the unevangelised find themselves in liminal spaces where all were invited to embrace change and transformation. Thus in acts of service we, as well as those we are seeking to serve, need to be converted. This is called mission in reverse.¹¹

D] The lens we are working with is the move from traditional spaces at the centre to marginal in-between spaces, which are the spaces of ambiguity and uncertainty, to the places of re-integration. This is the move from exclusion to embrace.¹² And while the story of the Eunuch does not reveal what happened to his journey of faith and his incorporation or otherwise into a faith community, the story of Saul and Cornelius are clear and poignant. Saul had to struggle with being embraced by the church as a whole (Acts 9:26-30; Acts 22:3-21; Galatians 1:11-2:10). And Peter had to make a valiant defence of what happened to Cornelius to the church at Jerusalem (Acts 11:1-18). This signals that not only Philip, Ananias and Peter needed to change but the church as a whole was called to conversion as a result of what took place in these strange spaces of marginality. The church needs to be converted if outsiders are to be welcomed into its life.

⁹ A. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*. Transl. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1960.

¹⁰ V. W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969.

¹¹ See A. J. Gittens, *Ministry at the Margins: Strategy and Spirituality for Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002) p.162.

¹² See M. Wolf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

I have made suggestive applications throughout this talk and won't take the time to summarise them here. But some further reflections are in order –

1. The God of the Bible cannot be contained in central locations, but can also be found at the margins.
2. Marginal spaces are full of uncertainty and ambiguity, but they can also be spaces of re-orientation and transformation.
3. The Spirit is adept at leading us into such spaces, but we need to embrace all the risks that are involved and to be open to our own further conversion.
4. Marginal spaces are God's strange gift to us. These spaces may occur due to a change in one's career, a loss of a job, a re-location in a new neighbourhood, an illness, a breakdown in a relationship. They can also occur when we make more time to be reflective and prayerful.
5. In this time of the fading and weakening of the church in the West, we need to become more open to the Spirit to take us out of our familiar church spaces to serve those in the world whom the Spirit is already preparing.

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