

Well, it's my last Sunday here, and that means I can say whatever I want. And what I most want to say is, "Thank you." Thank you for calling me to be your rector, and for walking with me in our journey of faith these last three years. Thank you in particular for everything you said and did to support and encourage me. So I want to end our time together with a message of hope and encouragement.

We all thought we'd have more time together, but as has been noted, we've accomplished a lot in the time we've had. There's always a tension between what God intends for us and what is feasible, because God intends such wonders for us out of God's infinite love, and yet the material universe and human nature contain limits that humanity cannot transcend. That's what the dispute about marriage in today's Gospel is about. There was no question that it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife because the Law of Moses not only says so, but explicitly says how it may be done. Jesus points out that the existence of divorce is a concession to human imperfection, not something God has as a goal for us.

And yet, God can bring profound and beautiful grace even out of the concessions our limitations require. Divorces can be deeply painful, but they can also represent reprieves from suffering, second chances, and opportunities for growth leading to deep joy. By the same token, while the last three years at Advent have been productive, but my leaving will accomplish something better, by ensuring that Advent will operate sustainably, and therefore survive as a parish, in perpetuity.

But God intends more for Advent than mere survival. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews set out an expansive, cosmic vision of grace and salvation that nevertheless makes clear that human beings have an important role to play, albeit subordinate to divine authority. The author notes that God brings Christians to glory, not by any earthly leader, but through the suffering and self-offering of Jesus Christ, establishing a relationship so intense that Jesus is proud to call us his brothers and sisters.

The question is always, what does it mean to be a brother or sister of Jesus in our place and time, with our gifts? Not just what is Jesus calling us to do, but who is Jesus calling us to be? These questions should not make us anxious; they should thrill and captivate us, and inspire us to greater devotion.

I'm reminded of a modern-day parable I made reference to in my sermon on the 7th Sunday of Easter this year, "The Parable of the Trapeze" by Danaan Parry, which seems even more relevant now than it did then. Parry observed that our attitude toward change can be like our desire to hold on to a trapeze bar even as we feel its momentum running out and a new bar coming into view. Then, we accept that we must let go of the current bar and grab the new one. This feels scary, even if we have made this transition many times before, and always survived.

Still, he observes, our greatest apprehension comes not from the new bar, but from the space in between, a space that our culture tells us is "a scary, confusing,

disorienting nowhere that must be gotten through as fast and as unconsciously as possible.” Wisely, he observes that the transition space is an incredible opportunity, “the most alive, most growth-filled, passionate, expansive moments in our lives,” a rich space where real change and growth can occur, and an experience that should be honored and savored. He suspected that transition spaces are the only real things, and the trapeze bars of familiarity and routine are illusions we create to avoid the uncomfortable feelings we associate with transition.

Parry only alluded to the divine in his parable, but I will be explicit. Transitions are spaces and times rich with blessing because in them, we are disabused of our notions that we, rather than God, are in control. Just like the Israelites in the wilderness, in our times of transition we have to face the fact that we are only and constantly dependent on God for our direction, our identity, and our very survival. This is what it means to be a child of God.

Jesus said that the Kingdom of God belongs to children, and remember that when he said that, children were legal nothings, utterly powerless, with no inherent rights or protections, purely dependent on the mercy of their parents. Accepting this role in our relationship with God is difficult; it is deeply counter-cultural, and offensive to our well-cultivated notions of power and dignity. But it is the truth. In God, and only in God, do we live, and move, and have our being. God is the only and ultimate source of our daily bread, not to mention our health and our salvation.

Fortunately, God is gracious and loving, giving us not only sustenance, but also meaning and purpose that lead us to joy. God does not leave us grasping in the dark, but rather illumines our understanding, especially in times of transition, if we are willing to open our eyes in faith. The temptation is always to shut our eyes firmly, to insist that we’ll get “back to normal” soon, and we just have to “hang on” until the old status quo is restored. But of course, the past is what has brought us to this moment. God is not leading us in circles. God has greater things in store for us than a return to a past that, in truth, has a lot of things that we don’t want to revisit.

By letting go of the trapeze bar of the status quo, we can embrace God in a way we otherwise could not. We do not worship angels, but they do hover over us, keeping evil and darkness far from us. We don’t have to learn how to fly through the void of transition, because the angels will do the flying for us. If we focus on prayer and truly open ourselves to the leadership of the Holy Spirit, we will find the new destinations, the new identities, that God intends for us, and we will find the courage to embrace them. Then will our joy be complete, for we will be the joy of Jesus our brother, and in the midst of the congregation, he will praise us.