

6/20/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

I Peter 1:13-2:5

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Live like you mean it

I've heard several people say recently that it seems like our church is kind of in a time of transition. I think that's true.

- We're moving out of the most severe pandemic restrictions, but it seems we may be feeling the consequences of the past year and ½ for some time to come yet.
- We're anticipating the use of a long-awaited newly built entrance at our building, along with the full-sized elevator – there will be some transitions with that.
- We're moving back to meeting together for Christian Education for adults as well as children in a couple of weeks.
- Our pastor, Caleb is on a sabbatical – there was some transition with his leaving and there will be some more when he returns at the end of July.
- There's been transition in our nation's political landscape; that feels quite different.
- Just in the last several days our community transitioned into harvest time – that makes many lives and routines different, people running on adrenaline, “burning the candle at both ends” as lots of energy is spent bringing in those sheaves and getting the next crop planted.
- I think many of us are curious about the transition that Goessel Church is experiencing. We're not sure yet exactly what it means that they've decided to withdraw their membership from the Western District Conference, the Mennonite Church USA and to remove the word “Mennonite” from their name. That seems like a pretty big change in our community, but the fullness of that transition will take time to unfold.
- And the changes aren't all external; some are more internal – relationships that are not the same as they used to be after so many months of isolation.
- There have been losses of loved ones and the transitions that brings.
- Some have experienced a real sense of liberation from the social pressures of not having to show up in-person, to church, to work, to school or wherever – and are not real sure how they feel about the transition to returning.

Transitions always require some sort of response. One can welcome and embrace a transition with enthusiasm. A person can simply tolerate a transition. Or, another response is to try to reject the change and work hard to put everything back the way it was before. Our responses can reflect lots of different things, like, was the change our idea, something that we played a part in bringing about? Or was it something completely out of our control that we had nothing to do with? Of course, we all have different personalities – some of us roll with changes more easily than others. How do you respond to transitions or changes?

The first people to receive this letter from Peter were also going through a lot of transition. They were mostly Gentiles who had heard the good news of Jesus and had converted from their

various pagan traditions to becoming followers of The Way. They had been baptized, had received the gift of the Holy Spirit and were living in the midst of various communities all over Asia Minor – modern day Turkey. Their commitment to following the ways of Jesus had brought major transition to their lives.

For starters, they needed to become familiar with the Jewish Torah, the writings and the prophets. This had become their adopted tradition and Peter makes LOTS of references in his letter to what we call Old Testament prophecies and the stories of the Hebrew people. Also, their allegiances had changed. The Emperor was to be respected but no longer worshiped. They now called Jesus “Lord”, not Caesar. This meant that they were often made fun of or even persecuted – something they had not experienced before. Their lifestyles needed to change. Their call was to be holy as God is holy. That’s a radical change of focus and expectation. To try to do all that they needed one another like never before. Following Jesus together in the midst of a culture that did not follow Jesus was terribly difficult. Peter was exhorting them to focus together on three things.

1) To prepare their minds for action. To take a sort of “sitting on the edge of my seat” stance, in life. They could no longer just float through life on auto-pilot imagining that things were the same as they’d been before. With their new commitment to Jesus and their baptism into the Spirit, they needed to be aware and alert to the guidance and movement of the Holy Spirit.

2) They needed to be disciplined or obedient, not just going along with the flow of the ways others around them were living, but making thoughtful, purposeful, faithful decisions that would clearly demonstrate the integrity of their faith in God, life decisions that would then be proven by their love and care for one another. No more self-centered only looking out for #1, but a transition of their behavior that reflected their understanding of Jesus’ sacrificial ways of serving and saving.

3) The source of their hope would now need to be Jesus. This transition was perhaps the biggest. This was about complete trust in and commitment to living out Jesus’ teachings – because this is what will bring God’s kingdom here, on earth. This is Peter calling for complete confidence in what God has already done and in what God will yet do through Jesus and those who follow him.

This letter – the Epistle of 1 Peter – is usually preached during the season of Easter because it’s all full of language about new birth, a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus, praising God for our salvation, rejoicing in spite of troubles, living out our gratitude and obedience to God. All theological cornerstones! But it was written to encourage and guide new Christians who didn’t have very many faith traditions established yet. Not to people like us who have LOTS of faith traditions very well established – here, in this community and this building for the last nearly 150 years, but also all of the Christian faith traditions of the last 2,000 years! Is there anything for us yet in this letter?

I propose that we’re not the only ones experiencing some transition right now. It seems there are very few churches that aren’t, and maybe that’s not all bad. Not easy! But maybe not all bad.

Peter wrote that just as Abraham was a stranger and an alien in a foreign land, these believers in Asia Minor were called to be strangers in their own land. They were rescued not FROM exile, but Peter says they were rescued INTO exile. Their alienation from the surrounding culture was actually a mark of their faithfulness.

If we believe what Peter wrote, that this is how we are to live as faithful, obedient children of God, imitating Jesus, then it seems to me that we have to choose to be in transition most all the time. Because God doesn't stand still. What if our human longing for everything to go "back to normal" is counter to what God is calling us to? What if *now* is precisely the time when we can, together, embrace the transitions, be open to what new things The Spirit might be prodding us to. What if instead of automatically returning to "the way things used to be" we can be thoughtful, intentional, attentive, and not just let "the former things" happen by default.

What might it look like in this time of transition for the Alexanderwohl Mennonite congregation to pay close attention to the three things Peter was writing about in this letter?

First – to prepare our minds for action. To be alert to the movement and the nudging of the Holy Spirit that might stretch or challenge us. And then to be ready and willing to respond. Second – to be disciplined, obedient. To make decisions that clearly demonstrate our faith in God, and that are proven by our love and care for one another. Now this certainly does not mean that we are always in agreement with one another! But rather that as we disagree we can do so in ways that continue to show love and care.

Third – to live in ways that show that all of our hope comes from Jesus. Not the government. Not the stock market. Not our children or our favorite sports teams. But we live with hope because of the ways Jesus lived. Because of the ways he showed us that love is stronger than fear and life has the last word over death.

If any of you have ideas or thoughts or questions about this, I'd sure love to hear them, to talk about it over a cup of coffee or a glass of juice. What is our call as God's people right now in rural Goessel in 2021? Let's pray.

God, I thank you for this time, for this Sabbath day, to gather together as your people. Thank you for your presence with us, with our ancestors, with us now and with those who will come after us. I thank you for your Holy Spirit working in our midst. Give us boldness and courage to be attentive and responsive. I pray that we might be disciplined and obedient as your faithful and loving children. And help us, God, to live as people whose hope is in Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen.