

Transitions: Keeping Our Identity in God

[Acts 1:1-11, 17:26-31](#)

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There is a tendency when going through changes to think about ourselves: "Oh, dear, what will happen to me? How will I manage? Poor me!" One of the basic teachings of our faith is that life has meaning when we orient ourselves in relationship to others, both to God and to other people.

I have a friend, Jen, who remembered when she had given birth to her first child. She found herself terribly down. She figured it was normal post-partum blues, but she told her husband in tears that though she didn't want to be sad, she was. He suggested she go visit Lillian—a mother of 6 and grandmother of 13. Surely Lillian would have some good advice for a new mother. So Jen went to see Lillian, and they talked, and Jen cried, and then Lillian said, "When I'm sad I find the best thing to do is to go do something for someone else." So Jen went home, and while the baby was sleeping she made cookies, and then when the baby got up from her nap, together they took the cookies to a woman in her church whose grandchildren lived too far away to visit. The woman got to hold the newborn baby, and Jen got out of the house and had a good time. By orienting her day toward someone else's needs, Jen felt much better herself.

We could name so many examples of how when we focus on something beyond ourselves, we find strength. When John Wesley—the founder of Methodism—sailed on a ship to the New World in 1736, among the passengers onboard was a group of German Moravian Christians. A storm came up, and the English passengers feared for their lives, but oddly enough the Moravian missionaries seemed unafraid. They sang hymns! It appeared they found their strength in God. It was two years later on May 26, 1738, when Wesley was feeling despair and spoke with Moravians again. Desperate, he cried out, "Lord, help my unbelief!" That night he attended a prayer service at Aldersgate and there he "felt [his] heart strangely warmed." From that point on, Wesley experienced the conviction that God was truly present in his life.

The disciples of Jesus were surely afraid. Jesus left them when he was arrested and crucified. And the story we read today in Acts tells also of another leaving. Jesus had presented himself to his followers after he had died, and then he ascended. He left them again. And the men stood there "looking up toward heaven." Two angels appeared and called the men to task: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?" The author describes it dramatically like this, with angels just as he did with angels at the empty tomb, because the feeling of loss must have been great. The disciples were dumbfounded. "Now what do we do?"

But the angels assured the followers: "You won't be alone." "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (11). It was an assurance of God's presence; that the Holy Spirit was to come again at

Pentecost. "Don't worry about being alone...and don't just stand there. There's work to be done."

In fact, the whole Book of Acts is the story of the work of Jesus' followers as they formed a community of people oriented on God and on the needs of people around them. They worshipped and healed the sick and shared all they had with one another. This was a community that was other-oriented.

The Book of Acts starts with today's first reading, the ascension—Jesus departing—and it continues with next week's Pentecost scripture and sermon by Peter. Then by the 17th chapter, the story of the early church moves on to Paul. In today's second reading we have the author's understanding of Paul's theology. Speaking of God, Paul says: "In him we live and move and have our being" (17:28). This may be the best definition of God in the whole bible!

Recently I asked in our monthly newsletter, *The Lynnewood Lines*, if there were sermon topics you wanted me to preach on. One topic you asked for was "Who is God?" (We could spend "from now until kingdom come" on that one!) Who is God? Here in our scripture, Paul is talking to the Greeks in Athens, and he is distinguishing between physical images of gods made of gold, silver, and stone versus a deity so personal that we are even somehow *in* God—"in him we live and move and have our being." I don't think you need to be convinced that God does not reside in an artifact or in an idol. But perhaps you may have difficulty imagining and articulating just what it means to be in intimate relationship with God. When we try to define something with words, we often find the words inadequate. And so, when trying to define God, over the centuries humans have turned to art, poetry, architecture, and music. We use metaphors, like calling God "Father." Paul says we are "God's offspring" (17: 29). We choose language like "children of God" to try to name that which truly cannot be named: a relationship so special it's like having a loving parent. Traditional Jews do not write the name of God, nor do they pronounce it except in prayer—God is too awesome, too unfathomable. Yet Jews and Christians have found alternate images to describe God. There can be no one finite definition for that which is infinite.

Jim and I have just been in three magical cities of Europe: Prague, Vienna, and Budapest. We walked through Gothic cathedrals with massive gray spires that point to God in the heavens. We stood in awe at Baroque altars with dazzling gold ornamentation. How many different ways there are to speak of God!

The three cities we visited have much in common—river settings, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and a history of Jewish life. In Prague, we visited several synagogues and a cemetery in the Jewish quarter. The story of Jewish identity in Central Europe is a story of faith in the presence of tremendous oppression. Jews have always been a people of Diaspora. They were scattered at the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem under the Romans; they were persecuted by Christians and Muslims in the Crusades; they were expelled from cities by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and by the Russian pogroms; and they were forced to live in ghettos where many starved, died of disease, or were executed. And then, most Jews who lived in Europe were finally collected, deported, and exterminated at death

camps by the Nazis during World War II. Through all this, something kept the Jewish people going. It was their religious identity and faith in God.

At Auschwitz Concentration Camp the Jews were forced to walk from the train cars to a selection line. When they got to the front, then we directed to go left or right. Most women and all the children went left. The strong women and healthy men went right. During this selection process an orchestra of inmates played music of German composers—Strauss and Beethoven. It was an orchestra of emaciated inmates—one for Auschwitz made of men and one for Birkenau, the most lethal of all concentration camps nearby, made of women. I read a book called *The Butterfly and the Violin* about a young Viennese violinist, named Adele, forced to play in such an orchestra. The conductor, also an inmate, became like a mother to Adele. When Adele became sick and was ready to give up and die of weakness and despair, her mentor said to her:

"Adele, you are family. Do you understand me? This family is more than the music we play for the SS. This, child, is our worship. To live and survive and play to God from the depths of our souls. This is the call that binds us. When we worship in the good times, it brings God joy, but worship in the midst of agony? That is authentic adoration of our Creator" (Kristy Cambron, 235).

The butterfly is a symbol of hope in the book. We find the butterfly in Holocaust art, as on the cover of your bulletin. It stands for freedom and transformation, and in Christian theology, it stands for resurrection.

No matter what our circumstances are, we can have hope because there is always something beyond ourselves and beyond our immediate needs. We call that God. We are called to make the most of our lives and to believe in God's purpose for us even in the midst of despair. You remember when the choir sang the words from an inscription on a cellar wall where Jews hid during the Holocaust:

"I believe in the sun even when it is not shining,  
I believe in love even when I cannot feel it,  
and I believe in God even when God is silent."

It doesn't do any good to focus inwardly, to reject God and close ourselves off from our loved ones and the people around us who need us. John Wesley said in his own prayer to God:

"I claim you as mine, and I give myself to you as yours."

Who is God? God is "the ground of our being" (Paul Tillich). God is in us and we are in God. God is the reason to live on through every life transition. We will weather life's disappointments and hardships when we keep our identity in God. God is the opportunity that comes with each new day. God is hope, and freedom, and love. Jesus is gone, but God is here. "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).