
Transitions: Neutral Zone (Wilderness)

Sermon Template

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:1-9

The following sermon is part 2 in a Sermon Series by Rev. Andrew Conard of the Great Plains Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The rest of the series is found at www.greatplainsumc.org/pastoraltransitions

Introduction

[Share brief personal story about a time when you were “in between” - perhaps between jobs, homes, or during another significant transition. If you’re the departing pastor, describe the current moment between your announcement and your actual departure. If you’re the arriving pastor, acknowledge that the congregation is currently in this “in-between” place.]

We are in the neutral zone in our congregation right now. We are in between what was and what will be. This in-between space can feel like wilderness - unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and uncertain.

Last week, we considered endings and how necessary it is to lean into endings so that we might have the opportunity for new growth in the future. Next week, we will take a closer look at new beginnings. Today, I want to invite us to reflect on the neutral zone in the middle – those places of wilderness and emptiness that we all experience during times of transition.

The Nature of the Neutral Zone

Fast Changes vs. Slow Transitions

In most of our lives, we don’t go quickly from one thing to the next, like flipping a switch. We wish it were that easy. Sometimes we get confused because we live in a very mechanical world where we can simply plug something in and it works correctly.

[Share an example of something mechanical that transitions easily - perhaps a coffee maker that works the same regardless of where it’s plugged in]

Our lives are not that way. [If departing: “When I leave on (date)...”] [If arriving: “When I arrived on (date)...”] the transition isn’t as simple as unplugging one pastor and plugging in another. There is emotional and spiritual work that needs to happen for me as your pastor and for the congregation.

Transitions take time, perhaps more time than we would like. In a few weeks, we may think that we should be over the pastoral transition, that we ought to be settled by now.

But transitions take time. Only after we have named our losses, grieved, and walked through the confusing neutral zone in the middle will we be able to start fresh and begin new things.

Neutral Zone in Scripture

The Story of Elijah

The scripture passage from 1 Kings speaks to our time of transition. Elijah was a major prophet in the Old Testament. He had been called to speak out against the worship of false gods. But then his life was threatened by Jezebel, the king's wife. He was running for his life - running into the wilderness.

Consider Elijah's journey as his time in the neutral zone:

- It was difficult and challenging
- He was sustained only by nourishment from an angel
- He was trying to figure out who he was and what he was called to do
- He wanted purpose and direction
- He needed to redefine his identity and calling

The Exodus

One of the most powerful stories of scripture is the transition that the people of Israel went through in what we call the Exodus. They had been crying out to God for a new way of living – a new beginning. They prayed for God to intervene, to bring them out of slavery and walk with them to the promised land.

And then it happened. They were out. They were free. They crossed the Red Sea and were on their way to the Promised Land. But to get there, to the land flowing with milk and honey, they had to become new people. They had to die to their old life so that they could be made new and find new life.

It took them forty years to cross the wilderness – not because of the distance, but because of the struggle to:

- Grieve what they had lost
- Let go of the past
- Be transformed as people
- Be ready for a new beginning

Jesus in the Wilderness

Jesus himself was called into a time of transition, a time away, a space to be still. Jesus didn't go directly from his baptism in the Jordan River to calling his disciples or preaching and teaching. Instead, he was in the wilderness for forty days.

We often focus on the temptations that came from the Devil, but those came at the very end of the wilderness time. What was the focus for the first forty days?

Could it be that even Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was drawn to a time of walking in the wilderness? Could it be a time of processing his ending as a Nazarene boy, a carpenter's son, so that he might become the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life? Maybe he too needed to die to his old self so that he might be our Savior and Teacher.

Our Transitions

So what about our transitions? Our own time in the neutral zone?

When an ending comes in our life, when a change happens, we can find ourselves in the wilderness. This wilderness is an in-between place. The old life no longer exists, and we have not yet arrived at a new beginning.

We are in the middle, and the neutral zone is often messy.

I suspect that many of us here today are in some transition - not only the pastoral transition but others in your life as well. Sometimes, we think that we are alone in the neutral zone. However, this is a common element of our lives as humans. We walk this road together.

If we want to be ready to experience new beginnings and new life, we have to walk in the wilderness. We need to let go of who we have been so that we can become who we will be. This journey calls for purposeful action. It takes safe space to explore who we are and what we want to become.

Our time in-between could be a time of preparing, changing, diving deep into our lives and purpose. Like prairie grass, like seeds of wheat, like the pregnant mother, we spend time in-between. The neutral zone creates the possibility to bring forth new life.

The neutral zone invites us to:

- Lose ourselves
- Set aside who we have been
- Put a hold on our ways of being
- So that we can find ourselves again

Jesus invites us to lose our lives for his sake and the sake of the kingdom so that we will find them – so that we can find new life!

Actions in the Neutral Zone

So, what can we do in the wilderness, in the neutral zone of the transition? What actions can we take when we are in transition?

In his book “Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes,” William Bridges suggests four practices that can help us navigate this wilderness time. These practices can help us find meaning and growth in the neutral zone rather than just enduring it:

Surrender and Release

Instead of fighting the uncertainty, embrace it as space for reflection and growth. Sometimes, when we are in the neutral zone, we have to stop trying not to be there. We may have to keep going forward into the wilderness. We may have to get comfortable being in between for a while. New life will be there, but not quite yet. Christ walks with us, and others are there too. We can surrender and release.

Be Alone

Find a regular time and place to be alone. Make space to process. Take time to pay attention without action. You may be able to leave for a few days to be alone, or it may happen in bits and pieces over weeks and months

Write a Log

Keep a journal of your wilderness experiences. Just start writing about what is going on, about how you are making meaning of this transition. Reflect on the past and see how you have transitioned before. Consider what you can learn about yourself during this time. The neutral zone is a time in which you make meaning of your life and perhaps begin to discover the new beginning that is ready to sprout!

Discover the Truth about You

Take this opportunity to discover the truth about you. Rarely do we know what we want – what we truly want. Or take time to reflect on who we are – who we truly are.

In the scripture passage from First Kings, God asks Elijah: “Why are you here, Elijah?” God asks him twice. Maybe Jesus is asking us, “Why are you here? What is the truth about you?”

When we are walking in the neutral zone, the wilderness, when much of our previous life has ended, when our ways of making sense of the world don't make sense anymore, then, and perhaps only then, we have the freedom to create, to discover who we truly want to become. We can remember the truth about ourselves again. It is possible to become the person that God dreams for us to be.

Conclusion

The good news is that God walks with us in the wilderness of our lives and brings life to the neutral zone.

So let's walk into the wilderness together:

- Surrender and release to the neutral zone

- Take time to be alone
- Write a log
- Discover the truth about you

This time in the wilderness may be scary. It can be hard. Those things that we have held on to for so long may disappear, but we will not despair.

Christ will be with you. Christ is with us. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray:

Jesus, we want to walk with you in the wilderness. We are sorry for the times we mess up. Forgive us and make us new. Thank you for your love. Please fill us with your Spirit. Help us to follow your path in all the stages of life. In Jesus 'name, Amen.

Adaptation Notes for Pastors

For departing pastors

Emphasize how this in-between time is a period of preparation for both you and the congregation. Consider sharing what you're learning in your own "wilderness" journey toward your next appointment.

For arriving pastors

Acknowledge that even though you're physically present, the congregation may still feel in the wilderness as relationships and trust are being built. Validate this experience while emphasizing your commitment to journey through this wilderness together.

For either context

Consider a ritual element that helps people symbolize their wilderness experience, perhaps through contemplative prayer, guided meditation, or an interactive prayer station.

Personalize

Add your own stories of wilderness or in-between times when God met you with provision, direction, or a "still, small voice." Your authenticity will help the congregation embrace their own wilderness time.

Visual aids

Consider wilderness imagery (desert, fog, paths through forests) or use items like a compass or map to symbolize finding direction in uncertain times.