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10/2017 | Monthly Topic

For everything there is a season

by Joy McDonald Coltvet

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. Ecclesiastes 3:1

Transitions are a part of life. In a fast-paced culture, it can even seem like that's the only way of life. Change. Change. Change. Even things that we may have thought of as unchanging have changed: landscapes, borders, leadership, ways of life over time.

The writer of Ecclesiastes describes this phenomena in a radically different time and culture—"there is a time for everything." As a human family and throughout the course of life, we will experience all of these at some point: birth and death, seeking and losing, silence and speaking, weeping and laughing, planting and harvest.

For a year, I volunteered at a retreat center where transitions were the fabric of daily life. Every day we said hellos and goodbyes as people came and went. We all memorized the prayer that we repeated daily to bless people on their way. An important component of each person's job in that ministry setting was to regularly update the "turnover file," a description of everything someone needs to know to do your job—because each of us knew that everyone's position is temporary. What each one does will be passed on to another. It's a reality at every workplace, but not every place acknowledges that so openly. Even when practicing transition daily, it can feel like too much sometimes.

There was another time in my life, when many of my colleagues were moving on all at once to other ventures and workplaces for a variety of reasons. After goodbye after goodbye, I started to feel like I couldn't go to one more farewell party. I was done. Not one more transition. I was overwhelmed by the flood of goodbyes.

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God promises:

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” Isaiah 43:2

This promise assures us of God's presence through all of life's changes, especially when those changes feel overwhelming.

Other transitions lead to incredible joy

We pack up a car and head to college, full of the dreams and hopes of a community that has blessed us on our way. We walk down an aisle to a new life of partnership. A baby is born, an adoption referral packet comes—we bear and build family.

In the beginning, it seems as if nothing can make a difference, but then there is a break-through. One day we cannot imagine life without a wall. The next day that wall is crumbling. In any struggle, there are identifiable steps: ignoring, then resisting, then anger, then mocking, and finally, change. When we get to live through and see these steps, there are tears of relief and gratitude and joy.

But what if the transition we long for is not happening? Plenty of good people will say to the one who is waiting for change, “Just hold on. Relax. Work on you while you wait.” That doesn't make it easier when we are longing for a transition, when we want to go to college or become married or bear a child.

When we long for healing or an end to pain or relief from grief. God has a heart for those who cry for change.

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Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married, says the LORD... Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; do not be discouraged, for you will not suffer disgrace; for you will forget the shame of your youth, and the disgrace of your widowhood you will remember no more...for the LORD has called you. Isaiah 54:1, 3, 6a

In the waters of baptism, we are adopted by God. We emerge, dripping wet, born anew. As we remember our baptism, we mark the sign of the cross on our foreheads and daily are born anew. Each day, we experience sin and death. We experience forgiveness and new life.

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true. Revelation 21:5

A new thing

"Oh yes" may be followed immediately by "oh no!" in our minds and hearts. Life is transition and depending on where we stand, we may rejoice or grieve as changes come along. When transitions in life are rapid or seem to be piling on one after another, they can feel overwhelming. A very human response is to dig in our heels and resist change. But sometimes God is the instigator of change. Where we are broken, God is at work piecing together the shards into a great mosaic. Where the fabric of life is ripped apart, God is mending and quilting. Where the stains of sin and evil are set in, God is scrubbing and cleansing. When God is doing a new thing, we can trust God. However difficult the change from old to new—Jesus is with us. God's Holy Spirit breathes on us, helping us to catch a glimpse of how the winds of the Spirit are shaping the world and our lives—and helping us to share that story.

And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it. Mark 16:20

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The Rev. Dr. Joy McDonald Coltvet is pastor at Christ on Capitol Hill, Saint Paul, a diverse urban worshiping community where she has the opportunity to talk daily with people experiencing transitions. She is also experiencing her own transitions through the journey of family, watching the seasons change, and the Spirit's transforming power.

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Change keeps on changing

by Angela T. Khabeb

I'm surrounded by change. I look outside my window and notice the familiar sight of leaves changing colors. Daylight is fleeting as night arrives earlier and stays longer. It's almost as if autumn is Mother Nature's ambassador for change. Not only is change swirling around me, but it is also stirring from within me.

I look in the mirror and see an older, rounder woman's face where my reflection used to be. I look at my amazing children ages 10, 7 and 5, and I marvel at how fast they've grown. I'm surprised how quickly they are becoming their own individual selves. There's an old adage that claims change is the only thing we can count on. I don't consider myself to be particularly resistant to change. In fact, I remember proclaiming for decades, "Change is good!"

Now, I'm not so sure.

Perhaps change is neutral, like Switzerland. Perhaps change is neither for us nor against us, but rather we assign value to change on a case by case basis depending on our circumstances or our perspectives. Change is slippery. Even though I wrestle with it, I'm unable to pin it down long enough to dissect it, to analyze it. Change exists in time and beyond time. It has the power to connect us to our past, present and future selves. The same instance can cause physical, emotional and spiritual reformation. Yet when we are in the throes of a challenging transition, it is virtually impossible to gain an objective vantage point. It may take years to unearth the wisdom of an especially challenging transformation. Change may be necessary, but that doesn't make it easy.

Head over heels

When I held our newborn Khenna for the first time I fell head over heels into his innocence. My

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eyes were transfixed by the tiny miracle I held in my arms. What would this precious bundle of potential become? I imagined his entire life. An astronaut, doctor, scientist? I reveled in his limitless possibilities, but I never thought for a second that he might grow up to become a woman.

About a year ago, Khenna told us, "I'm a boy on the outside but a girl underneath." The words came as a shock even though Khenna had been wearing girls' clothing almost exclusively. I had reassured myself that it was just a phase, but it was evident that my husband and I were in over our heads. We enlisted professional help so that we could navigate this steep learning curve. My husband and I met with a pediatric therapist who specializes in gender identity. She encouraged us to continue celebrating Khenna's gender journey because gender identity in children is often fluid until age 8 or 9. Since Khenna was only 6, we continued to embrace Khenna and shower our little one with love.

What matters most is that God understands. Khenna's story, like all our stories, is intimately connected to the divine narrative—that God loves us to death and beyond, and there is nothing we can do about it.

I realized that I had not fully embraced Khenna. Sure, we encouraged freedom of expression and we focused on Khenna's happiness. But what I was actually doing was biding my time, tolerating this detour of sorts—waiting for my little boy to come home. I still want the baby boy I brought home from the hospital. Where is he? I don't want to say goodbye to him. I do not want to walk that road. While I publically applauded Khenna's individuality, privately I lamented the loss of my son. I know the pain of losing a child. Our first child was stillborn. How could God expect me to walk that road again?

Intellectually, I understand that Khenna's gender identity is not about me. But that knowledge does little to soothe my heartache. More recently, Khenna asked us to use feminine pronouns to reference her. Challenging as it is for us, anything less is just tolerating her and toleration is a lousy substitute for unconditional love.

When I think of Khenna, I'm reminded of the biblical narrative of the humble young sheep herder who was anointed King over Israel (1 Samuel 16:4-13). God sent Samuel the prophet to Jesse's house. Jesse called his seven sons to come before Samuel. One by one they came. But God did not choose any of them. Samuel asked Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" Jesse told him that the youngest was

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outside tending the sheep. Even though David was the youngest and certainly the smelliest, Samuel wanted to see him because God had already cautioned, "Do not look on his appearance . . . for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." I guess the fine art of judging a book by its cover has withstood the winds of change.

When I am overwhelmed by the daunting responsibility of raising a transgender child, I remind myself about what is important to God. The psalmist declares, "LORD, you have searched me and known me. . . . You formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I will praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (139:1, 13-14).

I don't have to have all of the answers. What parent does?

God's promises are not contingent upon chromosomes, genitalia or gender. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter if I understand or if our church community understands. What matters most is that God understands. Khenna's story, like all our stories, is intimately connected to the divine narrative—that God loves us to death and beyond, and there is nothing we can do about it.

As Reformation people, every journey that we embark upon by definition offers a chance for rebirth. As Reformation people, we know that what seems like the end is often the beginning.

As Reformation people, we believe that death gives way to new life. Regardless of how unfamiliar the terrain, regardless of how difficult the journey, we are Reformation people, and every step on our journey brings us closer to who God has called us to be.

Ultimately, the only change that matters has already happened—at the font. At Khenna's baptism, I spoke these words, "You are the light of the world. . . . Let your light shine before others in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14,16).

Discussion questions:

1. Is God male, female, both, neither, or beyond gender?
2. If reformation, that is, change, is part of our spiritual DNA, why is change so challenging?

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3. Describe a time in your life when you resisted change.

Closing prayer:

Dear God, In the midst of changes that we cannot understand, help us remember your promise that nothing can separate us from your love that is lavished on us through Jesus Christ. Give us hope in times of transition, and strength to face each metamorphosis trusting in your never-failing presence. Amen.

The Rev. Angela T. Khabeb is a pastor at Ascension Lutheran Church in Waukesha, Wisc. She enjoys an active home life with her amazing husband, Benhi, and their three wonderful children Konami, Khenna, and Khonni.

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