

**Advent this year finds us in a time of anticipation, a time of waiting for Christmas, and a time in which we think we may not clearly see the path ahead of us during these times of change. As a people of faith, we need to watch for opportunities to find our Creator right here in this world, right here beside us and not in some far off place in another dimension we do not truly understand.**

**We have been so used to meeting God in our places of worship. We are accustomed to going to church on a Sunday morning and expecting that God will be waiting here for us to arrive. But God is not only present in our churches, and not only at our worship services and as part of our gatherings. God can also be found outside the confines of our church buildings. God is present in everyone we meet, and God is part of everything we do, and God is right here in all of creation. God is present in the lives of all humanity. Our Creator is here even in the face of these uncertain time in our world. God can be found out on the edges of society. And in fact, God likes to be out there.**

**The trajectory our world has been on for some time now, a path of wars, conflicts, and natural disasters, makes it difficult to find places of comfort, to find places where things seem to fit for us into something we would call “normal”. Where do we find these places of comfort, where are these places we consider to be safe? Truth is, we are all living in this uncertain time. And we may not like what is happening for our world. We might call these times, ‘wilderness’, and many of us are praying for all this distress to end.**

**Things can be hard when we are in a wilderness. Being caught in a wilderness is only one part of the journey we find ourselves on. As we move through this time, we are searching for answers, searching**

**for direction, searching for the safety of the other shore if you will. We are looking for anything which will take us beyond the distress we are experiencing right now. And what we are actually experiencing is this, we are in “times of change.” Let me repeat that, we are in the middle of a “huge time of change in our world.”**

**William Bridges, a renowned scholar and transitions specialist has written about these “times of change.” Bridges says this, and I am paraphrasing here. These are the times of transition, transition from all those things we have known as our normal and those things we have had to leave behind, and all the things we will never to be able to return to again. And then, then there is the unseen future, the time which lies ahead of us and of which we know nothing. Bridges goes on to speak more about the future. He describes it as being the “new normal”. It’s a future which lays somewhere down the road. Yet in this wilderness in which we, as a society find ourselves, have time and the opportunity to see things more clearly as we wait and anticipate what will come next. There is much for us to discover about ourselves, our world, and our Creator, as we wait. And this experience of life in the wilderness today is not unique to us in this time which we find ourselves. Throughout the history of the world, change has been the one constant. Everything changes, and life is full of transitions. And what we are experiencing is a “new expression of normal” for our time.**

**Take for example the journey every parish finds itself taking when their incumbent, their parish priest, announces that they are leaving the parish, either to retire or to move to another church, or to accept a change in their own career direction. Suddenly, the congregation is faced with loss. Yet for some people in any parish, the loss of a**

**trusted spiritual leader can be profound and may cause great distress. For others, it is but a step along the path into the future. For everyone in a parish, the departure of a spiritual leader puts them into a wilderness space, a liminal space, a time of questions and the search for answers. It is a time of transition, and a time of change. No matter whether we each accept this change or not, it is a journey that we all share.**

**Today, I want to speak about how God uses the people of the gospels to share God's blessings with the world. God uses us to affect change in our lives and that of the Church, in the same way God has used humankind in every generation.**

**As I said a moment ago, any change is an opportunity for us to view things through our intellect, to determine who we are, what we are about, and what God is calling us to be. So, I see times of transition as being more an opportunity for God to reveal what it is that He is requiring of us. Times of transition can be much more than a place where we find ourselves in distress and desolation. Times of change can be times of growth and reconciliation.**

**In our gospel reading taken from the very beginning of John's gospel, John the Baptist calls upon the people of Israel to turn from their ways of sin. To leave the old ways of sinning against God's Kingdom, and to ask forgiveness of our Creator. The people of Judea who answered John's call to repent, found themselves being drawn into a time of transition as they waited for God's forgiveness through baptism in the River Jordan. In this baptism of water, the people were brought out of the wilderness of sin and into a new relationship with**

**God as forgiven people. But was that all that awaited them, or was there more?**

**Through baptism by water, John taught repentance and forgiveness of sin. But he also told them this, “another, much greater than himself, would come to give them eternal life through sacrifice and through the gift of the Holy Spirit.” In this gospel story, the people of Israel found themselves on a wilderness journey. Sin has separated them from a right relationship with God. They were caught in this wilderness of sin. And John has been sent into this wilderness to give the people a new direction. John came to offer a path to forgiveness of their sins and to point them toward the future. A future in which they will have a new relationship with God through the sacrifice of the Messiah and the presence of the Holy Spirit. And this is good news for them and for us.**

**This past Friday, December 6<sup>th</sup> was the Feast day of St. Nicholas and I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge this historic man of change. Nicholas was a real-life bishop living in the fourth century in what is now the area known as south-western Turkey, in Asia Minor. He was pastor of a seaside church with a growing community of faithful followers. And his parish was not without its times of stress as money was short and everyone suffered. The story of St. Nicholas speaks of his generosity and his care for his people. He is said to have given much to many, so that their lives were made better. Nicholas was a change-maker. From the story of St. Nicholas, many Christians came to accept him as the patron saint of children and sailors, and the one on whom we have patterned our gift giving at Christmas time. If you have an opportunity to read about Nicholas, I think you may see how**

**his generosity and his faith in God's blessings gave Nicholas hope for a better future.**

**We are people of transition, transition which occurs in every aspect of life. We are continually saying goodbye to the old patterns of living we have become so accustomed to, and moving through the wilderness of life trying to find the other side, looking to find that "new normal". John the Baptist was willing to step into the wilderness of first century Judea to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah to God's people.**

**I have realized in my own life that I will never be without transition. Even my own journey from birth to death is a journey lived through transitions, and I find myself sometimes in a wilderness of my own creation. But as the people of God, we have hope because God has promised us life eternal if we are faithful to his call. And in a world full of change, we have the love of our Creator to guide us through these uncertain times. And for this, we are thankful. Amen**