

Moving Forward: Lessons from Our Transition From Black Rock
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Josh:

If you were here for our service last year, you may remember Bethany and I shared about our then-recent decision to move on from our time at Black Rock, and we shared about some lessons we learned from our time at camp, where I was the Summer Camp Director for 9 years, leading the team of 50 summer staff and running the summer camp program

Well here we are one year later now having gone through that transition and so Merv thought the timing was appropriate for us to share again, this time for two reasons:

- 1) To reflect on what we have learned personally through this transition and in light of that;
- 2) To share what we think Mt. Vernon can learn as we enter a time of pastoral transition here

Bethany:

A few disclaimers...We certainly don't have all the answers, we didn't do everything perfectly through transition, we still are working on many aspects of adjusting, and the experiences of transition are not going to be identical, but we did think of a few things we have learned that we thought would be helpful to reflect on. We have chosen a couple topics. So with that in mind, Josh will begin with the first one.

Josh:

#1 – Soak in the Word

After we left Black Rock, we decided to start a bi-weekly Bible Study at our home, with local summer staff that I had supervised, disciple, and worked with at camp. I chose the book of 1 Kings. We did this study for a couple reasons:

1. I chose 1 Kings because it is basically a book about how Israel handled leadership transitions. As the name suggests, it focuses on the line of Kings in Israel and Judah, and I felt there would be a lot to learn about transition (mostly pitfalls to avoid, but some good concepts as well).
2. I thought it would be helpful to study this topic WITH my summer staff to both help them process and respond appropriately to my leaving, but also to continue having fellowship and discipleship opportunities with them. Also most of them are teenagers or young adults, and in a stage of life where they are going through a lot of transition, and 1 Kings provides a lot of lessons that are relevant to their tumultuous time of life.

For me personally, preparing for and leading this Bible study was an enriching time of spiritual growth. It was an anchor for me in the time of transition. And I will admit that I had a bad habit – normally when camp ended each year, I would essentially “take a spiritual break.” I was so spiritually engaged over the summer but somehow when it ended, in my flesh I thought I was entitled to disengage. Not read my Bible, not spend time in prayer consistently, waste my time, be lazy. I hated that I did that and I knew it was wrong. I was like a football player who as soon as the season is over, stops taking care of themselves and gets out of shape. But then they know they have to get back in shape for the next season so they hit the weight room and lose the fat and start putting on muscle. That's kinda what I was doing year after year. So I would disengage for a time after camp but I always had the next summer to

motivate me to get back in “spiritual shape.” Well this year I didn’t have a “next summer”, plus it wasn’t healthy, so starting the Bible study which provided more motivation to spend time seeking God and soaking in the Word – to stay engaged, to be intentional with my time, and to grow in my spiritual walk.

So today Bethany and I will be sharing some of the leadership and transition lessons we learned from 1 Kings as we soaked in the Word.

One of those lessons is this...**Transition is rarely (if ever) seamless, but God is still at work in spite of the problems we or others create.**

In reading through 1 Kings I guarantee you that the worst transition you have been through pales in comparison to many of the transitions of power in Kings. For example, at one point, Israel had 3 kings in the span of a week. The first king got drunk and was assassinated by one of his officials who seized power, only to be in power for a week before his palace was under siege so he lit the palace on fire around him, where he perished and a third king in 7 days took over. Not what I would call peaceful transition of power.

Here is another really bad transition. Turn to 1 Kings 12. Love to read the whole thing but for time sake I will summarize some of it. Solomon has just died, and his son Rehoboam is made king.

Read 12:1-17

Because of this, the kingdom is split in two, terrible, dark time in Israel’s history. You could say Rehoboam blew it, and he did, but it’s not *just* his fault. The people essentially used blackmail “Do this or we won’t serve you” – so they didn’t respond in a healthy way either, and his trusted friends gave him bad advice. But did you catch what else was at play here...look at verse 19. “...this turn of events was from the Lord, to fulfill the word the Lord had spoken...” Ultimately, God is Sovereign and is working in spite of the problems we create.

#1.5 - Transition is rarely (if ever) seamless, but God is still at work in spite of the problems we or others create.

Our transition from camp wasn’t without bumps and bruises for us and Black Rock, but even the things we didn’t do well at, God was in the midst of it. It even felt that some of the turns of events were from the Lord. We weren’t supposed to share about our leaving with my staff until the end of the summer, but through a strange coincidence someone accidentally found out we were leaving, and at first it seemed really problematic, and we ended up sharing with two weeks left in the summer. But looking back I am glad that happened because I believe it was better that we shared when we did than what was originally planned. This turn of events...was perhaps from the Lord, and he definitely worked in the midst of that.

Our pastoral transition is very different than the transitions of power in the Old Testament. Pastors are not Kings, our church is not a monarchy. I don’t expect Tony will want to scourge us with scorpions or have to set himself on fire to escape an uprising. I hope not anyway. But the principal here is the same – the transition will not be seamless, and we all have choices to make about how to respond to changes, including Merv and Tony, but even when mistakes are made, God is at work in the midst of it. Not that all bad decisions are a fulfillment of prophesy, but God can and will be working IN SPITE of our circumstances and decisions in this transition.

So let's use this time of transition not to grow spiritually lazy, or to take a spiritual break, but to be all the more engaged in growing in our faith through being anchored in his Word. If we are spiritually mature, we will turn to God, dwell in his Word, soak in his Word, and ask him to help steer us through danger – knowing he is at work in the midst of it.

Bethany:

#2 – Do What Is Right In The Eyes Of The Lord

As Josh and I were preparing for the transition of leaving camp, we reflected a lot on how to prepare to go through this transition in a healthy way. One of the factors that we kept coming back to was that as humans, and honestly a Christian community in particular, we struggle to respond to change in healthy ways, especially on a systemic level in churches, camps, non-profits, etc. We struggle to move forward into things that feel uncomfortable because they are unfamiliar. This is often rooted in a sense of fear of unknowns which then expresses itself through our attitudes. It can be easy in those unfamiliar situations to find ourselves giving in to tendencies like talking about other people and their actions or responses, to compare what was known with what is changing and complain about it, and to share opinions that aren't grounded in fact or faith but rather in what we fear will happen. Throughout the transitions that took place in the books of Kings something that repeatedly stood out to me was the consistent description that marked the life of a king was either that they "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord" or "did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord"...there were no qualifiers given for difficult circumstances, no excuses because someone negatively influenced them. Ephesians 4 quickly comes to my mind with instruction for how we can live in a way that is doing right in the eyes of the Lord. This may seem intimidating, I'm thankful that as Kendall shared a few weeks ago, we come as we are and ask Holy Spirit to provide the increase. In being completely humble, gentle, patient, and bearing with one another in love; we will be making every effort to maintain peace and unity as we go through this coming transition together, with verse 29 being the main checkpoint. How might our circumstances and relationships change if we filtered everything we say through that verse? Let me read it again...as parents, as spouses, as employers/employees, as representatives of Christ in all situations...oh that we would only say good things for building up and giving grace to the hearer!

So not only should we be seeking Holy Spirit's help for ourselves, but what do we do when those around us being affected by the changes are struggling? This past year, Josh and I quickly realized that we needed to be on our guard against fear based attitudes in ourselves, but also not engage with others who were talking negatively about changes being made since we left camp. It was and is hard to draw this line and really walk in victory in this area, especially when the people talking to you are close family or friends and you want to be supportive in the difficulty they are experiencing while not engaging in destructive attitudes. Over time I have tried to start asking myself these questions to help myself refocus, hopefully they can help you too.

1. Am I trusting that God is in control and at work? Romans 8:28 Previously in this chapter the writer is outlining God's master plan for saving us through faith in Jesus Christ, that we would walk according to the Spirit and how we are heirs with Christ, and that we should not consider the sufferings of this present time worth comparing to the glory to be revealed in us, that if we don't know how to pray we can ask the Spirit who is always interceding on our behalf, that we are predestined, called, justified, and glorified. Reading this fills me with confidence that God has a plan and is constantly at work for His purposes, and this includes me! So why, when I'm in

unfamiliar situations, is it easy to feel like I'm all alone and question whether God sees or hears me? When I'm focusing on God being in control and at work in every situation, I don't have to talk around about what other people are doing or about what I'm afraid of happening...I can rest in trust that God is at work.

2. Am I resting in God's perfect love? 1 John 4:18-19 I talked at the beginning about fear being a common response to the unfamiliar. Do we subconsciously equate change, transition, and the unfamiliar with punishment? What if instead of focusing on the unfamiliar we choose instead to look for the things that never change...the assurance that God will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5 – money related?), that He is our ever present help in times of trouble (Psalm 46:1), that God is present and at work in our lives and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39). When I'm focusing on God's perfect love I can view the unfamiliar as God's provision, not just punishment.
3. Is Christ being preached? Philippians 1:18 Change is a part of any healthy growing organism. Leonard Sweet once said "Change is life. Stagnation is death. If you don't change, you die." Josh had made many changes in his time at camp and people got used to that, but we knew that any changes made in his absence had the potential to feel abrasive or out of place to people until they got used to the new leadership. We made the choice early on not to challenge changes that were made after we decided to leave, even if we didn't agree with them. If people came to us legitimately concerned, we tried to encourage them to go directly to the decision maker to seek understanding. It kept coming back to this one qualifier for me..."Is Christ being proclaimed?" A head pastor, just like a summer camp director is to a camp, is a key shaper in the expression of a church. Even if every single member of the congregation is the same, things are going to feel and look different to a certain extent. That's ok! In fact that's good! But the question to keep reminding ourselves is "Is Christ being proclaimed?"

My hope is that as we go through these coming months and into years of transition at Mt. Vernon that we can continually ask ourselves these three refocusing questions: am I trusting that God is in control and at work? Am I resting in God's perfect love? And is Christ being proclaimed? If there are things that truly raise a red flag in your spirit, then go to the source of the decision and seek clarity, but my prayer is that we are a shining light to each other and those outside of Mt. Vernon of walking in a manner worthy of our calling and doing what is right in the eyes of the Lord.

Josh:

Something else that stood out in the transitions we find in the book of 1 Kings is this:

#3 - Different leaders have different God-given directives that they are to accomplish.

Read 1 Chronicles 28:2-3, 6-7

Read 1 Kings 5:1-5

When I left Black Rock there were a number of changes that took place, some of which I wanted to do but never got around to doing. I had other things that were of greater focus for me, so even though some things were in my heart to do, I felt it wasn't for me to focus on with my particular gifts and objectives.

I am sure it will be that way for Merv as well. There are things that I am sure were on his heart to do, but either the Lord said “not now” or there were simply too many other areas of focus that took priority for him. This isn’t a failure of his at all. David had it in his heart to build a temple but the Lord said “it’s not for you to do.” David’s purpose and skills lined up with what Israel needed when he became King, he defended the people from attacks, he established the capital city, he enlarged their territory and he lead the people with a heart after God. Obviously he had his serious flaws and mistakes as well, as every leader. But he was still a man after God’s heart. Solomon was the right man for a new era, a new time in Israel’s history. He wasn’t a warrior, he was a diplomat. God gave him great wisdom so he could form strategic diplomacies, establish a time of prosperity and peace, and ultimately, fulfill the dream that David had and passed on to him to build the Temple.

I strongly believe Merv was the right person for Mt. Vernon for the past 10 years. He came to a hurting congregation and he brought reconciliation, healing, and badly needed bylaws, procedures, and structures. Those are just a few of the gifts that Merv brought that should be honored and we should be thankful for. On the other hand, Tony will be coming to a very different Mt. Vernon, and we can look forward with excitement about the gifts and skills and vision that he will bring to the table as we walks alongside us. To compare the two in overly critical ways will not only be unhealthy, it’s irrelevant because they are different people coming in a very different times, with different God-given directives to accomplish. Everyone has weaknesses AND strengths, and it’s not fair to compare the weaknesses of one to the strengths of another. Let’s be gracious, both in our reflections of Merv and in our welcoming of Tony and changes that take place.

Closing:

Bethany:

To summarize, lessons we learned from 1 Kings as we have transitioned from Black Rock, that we believe are also applicable to Mt. Vernon at this time:

- 1. Soak in his word.**
- 1.5 God is still at work in spite of the problems we or others create.**
- 2. Do what is right in the eyes of the Lord**
- 3. Respect that leaders have different God-given directives that they are to accomplish**

Josh:

In closing, I would like to read the words that Solomon spoke to the whole assembly of Israel at the dedication of the temple:

Read 1 Kings 8:56-61