

TRY DIFFERENT PRACTICES
Isaiah 43: 16-21; Hebrews 4: 15-16

Several years ago I heard someone tell me that a “rut is a grave with the ends knocked out.” I thought about that and wondered about the wisdom of such a comment. I’ve decided there are differences between *ruts*, *routines*, and *rituals*. A *routine* may be the way you like the comfort of your predicable breakfast- the food you seek, the beverage you enjoy, and even the place where you sit. It is something that can be done when our brains may still be sleepy. There may also be a certain time that you walk each day, or go to retrieve your mail, or plan for your other meals. The morning one, it seems to me, falls the most into the “routine” category. A “rut” gets created mostly when we something we do does not really help ourselves, or help others, and we fail to put the energy forth to create a new pattern, way of thinking, or way of living. Ruts can lead to hoarding, or overeating, or excessive drinking. Ruts can lead to apathy and sarcasm about the world-an easy place to land in our world today. But ruts are like treadmills for people; they step on and mindlessly walk, but they go nowhere. Sometimes change is not a bad word. The other R word today is “Ritual.” Ritual is often associated with religious activities or spiritual disciplines. There are some unnerving stories that sometimes surface as a result of religious experimentation. Here’s a funny story:

There once was a monastery that was very strict. Following a vow of silence, no one was allowed to speak at all. But there was one exception to this rule. Every ten years, the monks were permitted to speak just two words. After spending his first ten years at the monastery, one monk went to the head monk. "It has been ten years," said the head monk. "What are the two words you wish to speak?"

"Bed... hard..." said the monk.

"I see," replied the head monk.

Ten years later, the monk returned to the head monk's office. "It has been ten more years," said the head monk. "What are the two words you wish to speak?"

"Food... stinks..." said the monk.

"I see," replied the head monk.

Yet another ten years passed and the monk once again met with the head monk who asked, "What are your two words now, after these ten years?"

"I... quit!" said the monk.

"Well, I can see why," replied the head monk. "All you ever do is complain."

Sometimes rituals are seen as the framework for our religious expressions. For example, the words at the top of your bulletin let you know it is not yet Easter, nor is it Christmas. It is the season of Lent, with sanctuary appointments that are more plain, and with more silence included in the services. We are not singing the Gloria Patri right now—which is often a weekly ritual—nor are we singing the Doxology. At Easter I plan to bring back the Apostles' Creed and unpack one of the most controversial lines in that statement of faith. All of these things are done to shake up or modify rituals of faith. Easter will have a grand Doxology while Maundy Thursday will have Holy Communion like we serve it on no other days of the year. Rituals provide a framework for our religious experiences that, when altered, can provide refreshing new insights into the holy. Even God chose at times to do things in different ways, perking up the senses and inviting us to consider new realities. Through the prophet Isaiah, God said: "I am about to do a new thing: now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? [Isaiah 43:19] Then God describes an example of the changes: "I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." A way in a wilderness; *that* could be a new thing! I remember in one of my Boy Scout summer camps we were introduced to a wilderness; a forest that had been uncleared and untouched by humans. The Boy Scout Council decided that making a trail that disturbed as little else as possible would be worthwhile, teaching boys to hike through and observe what was on the ground, in the trees,

and all around. But first a way had to be cleared; a path. We came with our hiking boots on, with our axes, and our pocketknives. Some also carried hard tine rakes; leaders carried machetes. And together, we made a way in the wilderness. When God said there will also be a “river in the desert,” it is hard to imagine, because deserts by nature are arid climate. But with God, all things are possible.

In our spiritual lives what new paths might we create? And how might new rituals enhance our life’s journey? One person has written these insightful words:

Rituals motivate and move us. Through ritual we build families and community, we make transitions and mark important events in our lives, we express ourselves in joy and sorrow, and perhaps, most importantly, we create identity. ...Our ancient ancestors used the bond of ritual to create ties to kinship necessary for survival in a world rife with dangers. [Alison Bone, “Why Rituals are Still Relevant” sbs.com.au. June 27, 2016.]

Through the pandemic, we tried different spiritual practices. We have had theological discussions about whether churches could have true sacramental connections with each other when they prepared their own bread and juice product to eat in front of a computer or television screen. We decided that we were in unprecedented times and so someone had to cut a path through that wilderness. We and other congregations chose to do so, not as the only way to offer Holy Communion, but one way for people across miles to feel the connection. Although Maundy Thursday has always been a unique Communion ritual in this congregation, this year it will change again, dropping the practice of intinction (where each person dips bread into the cup to partake,) but adding beautiful wood bread boards to offer portions of bread that will look like small loaves, and individual cups with pale red juice resembling wine that will be offered from handmade wooden trays. Sometimes a new spiritual practice can turn into a new custom. Today for the first time, we will use a communion table that was

handcrafted by Elder Ted Stedman in memory of Elder and longtime faithful member and greeter, Lou “Lucian” Rowland. It will be on the ground floor while the original table stays up. I will invite people to partake from this table, and those in person will be invited to come forward by the center aisle partake immediately, place the empty cups in the baskets on either end of the front row, and return to their seat by the side aisle. A new ritual for today, that may become a custom, or may not. But *with purpose*; it is not the way we have always done it. At a later time, we may be able to offer communion in the pews if that is still desired.

New paths; new customs; new rituals. They are not ruts. Today’s new ritual will not be routine; it may even become a practice that enhances our pathway to God.

Let us pray: Holy God: throughout the ages people have sought ways to get even closer to you, and you provided Jesus as our Great High Priest, an intercessor for our sake. Draw us nearer to your Holy Throne by the invitation of your Holy Son, that we may enrich our spiritual lives and create a new pathway to your splendor.

In the name of Jesus, the Great High Priest we pray. Amen.

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