

Conversion to Transformation

Mark 9: 21 - 9

Newtonbrook United Church - February 22, 2009



You won't see it in your bulletin, but the title for today's sermon is: **Conversion to Transformation**. That's what this time of worship is about. It is based on the story of what happened to Jesus on Mount Sinai - a conversion to transformation.

It is a difficult time for me right now. That's because I have three tasks in the next few minutes.

1. There are many here who expect that the preacher will reflect on the story that was read from the Gospel, and help make it relevant to our lives in the 21st century.
2. We have members of the Scouting movement among us this morning and some may not have heard a sermon before - but they have heard that sermons are long, boring speeches. I want to alter that impression.
3. Today is the Annual Meeting of this congregation: a time when we normally review what we have done in the past year. Sermons on Annual Meeting Sunday are usually about our purpose as a congregation. Today's sermon is about a **conversion to transformation**.

When I discussed this with Shari, her comment was - "Make it short."

That made it even more difficult!

The story from the Bible that was read today is about Jesus. He and some of his followers went to the top of Mount Sinai, where Jesus had a conversation with God. That conversation changed Jesus. His disciples say that he was transformed.

We know stories about transformation in the world today AND we know that the world we live in needs to be transformed so that everyone can live in peace; with justice and in a loving relationship with all of life.

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This story from the Bible tells us that transformation is possible. That's good news!

Let me tell one story about how transformation happens in this world. Young people here may know a story written by Eric Carle about a "Very Hungry Caterpillar".

You will see that we have a banner here in the sanctuary with a butterfly on it.

You may know the story of the Monarch butterfly: After it hatches from the egg, the caterpillar becomes a voracious eater. It devotes its life to being a consumer of all things edible. In that way it is a bit like a consumer society - consumption is good - more consumption is better. Where have you heard that recently? - We need more consumption, to save the economy - regardless of what may happen to the earth.

When it has had its fill, the caterpillar fastens itself to a convenient twig and encloses itself in a chrysalis. This is when things become really interesting.

Once it is inside the chrysalis, the caterpillar passes through a time of crisis. The structures of its cellular tissue begin to dissolve into an organic soup.

However, that isn't the end. There appears to be something that biologists have labeled, "organizer cells". These cells move around and gather other cells to form what are called, "imaginal buds". These are multi-cellular structures that eventually form into the organs of a new creature.

It isn't all that simple. Within that chrysalis there is an immune system. When the organic soup forms, the immune system mis-interprets the work of the imaginal buds and attempts to destroy them. The imaginal buds survive this attack by linking up together in a cooperative effort that brings forth a new being of great beauty; wondrous possibilities, and very little resemblance to the caterpillar from which it originated.

In its rebirth, the Monarch butterfly lives lightly on the earth, serves the regeneration of life as a pollinator, and it migrates thousands of miles to experience life's possibilities in ways that the earthbound, consuming caterpillar could not imagine.

The caterpillar's transformation is physical. **The human, mountain-top conversion to transformation for followers of Jesus is a spiritual experience.**

With stories like the feeding of 5,000 people, beginning with five loaves and two fish, Jesus teaches us that we live in a world of ABUNDANCE! There is enough to meet everyone's

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needs. We are called to transform the world by demonstrating generosity - what **Beavers** learn in their chant "sharing, sharing, sharing".

Jesus constantly challenges us to *IMAGINE* the kingdom of *God* here on earth. We pray for that here in worship every week. A scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures, Walter Brueggemann, says that once we begin to ask, "is it practical; is it realistic?" we are asking the questions of Empire.

**"We need to ask not whether it is realistic or practical, or viable,
but whether it is *imaginable*.¹"**

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, page 44

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We need at this time to IMAGINE THE CONVERSION of the economy, for example , which clearly isn't serving people today. We need to IMAGINE an economy that is life-giving and, like Jesus, demonstrates ABUNDANCE. When we ask why the economy of the world is in such a sorry mess the Empire's answering machine has no answers. 20 professional economists have 40 responses by saying, "on the other hand"

*"Record prosperity hasn't cured child poverty"*² according to one of America's prophetic voices - the Rev. Jim Wallis. Let's imagine a world where all children go to bed at night on a full tummy.

Imagine a church congregation that works out of a framework of ABUNDANCE, rather than scarcity. Is that transformative?

Imagine the church as a spiritual oasis for nomads, rather than a place of religious settlement. . Is that transformative?

Imagine a church Annual Report that focuses on what we hope to do in the coming year, rather than what we have accomplished in the past. . Is that transformative?

Imagine this congregation as being something other than a franchise of the United Church of Canada. . Is that transformative?

Imagine that the promises that we make as Beavers, Sparks, Cubs, Brownies, Scouts, girl Guides, and Christians, imagine that those promises have the power to **convert** us into people of hope who make a difference in God's world - and God's world gets **transformed**.

Conversion to transformation can happen when we too listen for God to speak to us.

Just imagine the possibilities!

*Eternal God,
in the shadows of your world,
in the hunger of your people,
in the midst of the propaganda of the nations,
may we be converted to being the people of transformation,
so that this may be a world of inclusion and acceptance;
a world of the future and not of the past;
a world of abundance and not of scarcity;
a world where everyone is assured of your love. Amen*

² Jim Wallis, God's Politics, page 76

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