

July 8, 2018
 “Our Transforming God”
 2 Corinthians 3: 17-18

All scripture quotations are from the *Common English Bible*.

For a reminder of what God’s miraculous transformation can look like, check out this video of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ocWgSgMGxOc>

You’ve seen this before, but it’s still as amazing to me as if it were the first time. God’s power to transform his creatures and the world is nothing short of miraculous. As God transformed chaos into a beautiful earth, a humble people into his chosen ones, the unqualified and unimportant into his prophets and servants, and a tiny baby into the Prince of Peace, so he ever transforms his people—*all* his people. ***Our God is a transforming God.***

I’d also have to describe my own transition into a pastor as miraculous. I’ve never been as beautiful as a butterfly, but if it’s possible to be as dumb as a caterpillar, then that’s what I was when I took my first appointment. I had never planned on or asked to be a pastor. When the vacancy suddenly arose 14 years ago at New Milford and Davis Junction, I was literally the only ministry candidate in the district who didn’t have an appointment already. Not exactly a ringing endorsement!

What happened next is every bit as amazing to me as the metamorphosis of a caterpillar. God took my faith, my desire to serve him, what few gifts and skills I had, and transformed me into a pastor. Not the best one in the world, because it was me he had to work with, but one that was good enough to lead his people in calling forth his Kingdom. Our God is a transforming God. Praise God!

Let that idea settle in as you hear 2 Corinthians 3: 17-18:

The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Lord’s Spirit is, there is freedom. All of us are looking with unveiled faces at the glory of the Lord as if we were looking in a mirror. We are being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to the next degree of glory. This comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Let’s pause on the metaphor, “All of us are looking with unveiled faces at the glory of the Lord as if we were looking in a mirror.” From this we see that ***our job as Christians is to become more like God.*** We are not just to hang out in the pew and be good persons. We are to grow—in faith, in mercy, in forgiveness, in justice, in creativity, in wisdom—in every Godly quality. We are to grow to the point that when we look in the mirror, we see God looking back; and when others look at us, they see the face of God. That’s a tall order! But we don’t do it by our power,

we do it by God's power. And we do it not overnight, but little by little, over the course of our whole faith journey.

Which brings us to the next line: "We are being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to the next degree of glory." ***We don't become more like God by staying as we are. We are transformed by God into his image.*** As caterpillars become butterflies, we become more faithful disciples that reflect, more and more, God's image to the world.

And scripture tells us it is glorious! Faithfulness isn't just about sacrifice and service and humility, it's also about love, joy, hope, peace—the light of God living within us!

Our God is a transforming God, and we are being transformed into his very image!

There is evidence of this all around us. I have been transformed by my time in Rockton. Because of you, God has worked in me to be a more confident pastor. Your support and encouragement have enlarged my heart. You have upheld me when I struggled, you have celebrated my successes, you have empowered my discernment. You have built me up in Christ, and enabled me to be the best pastor I can be.

At the same time, I have been transformed into a more humble person. There is so much I don't know and am not gifted at. Your wisdom and gifts have been a blessing to me at every turn. I have made so many mistakes, and your gracious teaching has expanded me in places I didn't know I needed to be expanded! Because of all you have taught me, I have learned new things, and also learned more about my limitations.

I have been marked by your faithfulness. The way you care for each other, your love of your community, your passion to help, your openness to new ideas have all been rivers of grace I have floated on. You have shown me what a church can be, and I go forth from here transformed by your hope and vision.

Here's just one example of how God has transformed me through you. I was so inspired when I first came by the chili supper the church does in December. The church is at the center of the community, participating in the local celebration. And serving their neighbors. It was pure delight to see how many people came that weren't part of our congregation. Last year, a man spoke to me as I cleared tables, saying that his family has been coming to our chili supper for years, and that it's a family tradition for them.

Because of you, my perspective of the place of church in community will never be the same. I will always now see the church, not as an island, but as central to and a part of the larger community. And you have taught me this lesson over and over. Veteran's meals, soup kitchen, supplying the food pantries, the comments on the response sheets of the ways that you are committed to your community, have all contributed to this transformation. Wherever I serve in the future, the people will be in debt to you because of how you have shaped me as a Christian and leader.

This is all evidence of God working in and through us to bring new life to us and the world. God is transforming us from glory to glory! We are becoming closer to his image.

There is more transformation ahead. I believe ***pastors are called to a church for a season for a reason***. Each one brings different gifts, and each one impacts the congregation in a different, meaningful way. There are some pastors gifted in preaching, others in pastoral care, still others in administration, shepherding, wisdom, and so on. Each church needs all these gifts, but no single pastor can provide all of them equally. So over the course of a church's life, different pastors are called to bring different things at different times. And each gift of each pastor will call forth a different kind of transformation. I believe this is part of God's overall plan for his church and his kingdom.

But it's not just pastors that come bearing gifts. ***You have gifts to give that will be transforming your new pastor***. Your gifts of compassion, care for your community, flexibility, creativity, service, willingness to be renewed are going to transform your next pastor. ***There is someone out there right now who needs you!*** God is right now planning for someone to be here who needs to be changed by your faithfulness. I will be telling my successor to buckle their seatbelt! A whole bunch of transforming service, love and grace is about to come their way. They will be so blessed by you! You will be making a huge difference in the life of someone God is sending you.

Have you ever watched a butterfly come out of their cocoon from beginning to end? I have, and I can tell you it takes a long time, it's hard work, and it looks uncomfortable. ***This is the reality of transformation: in order for it to take place, something has to die***. The egg has to release the caterpillar, and disappear in the process. The caterpillar has to surrender itself to become the chrysalis. The chrysalis is wiped away as the butterfly is called forth.

Christian transformation sounds good, but this part of it we don't really want to talk about. Something in us has to die, so that a new self can be born. I can tell you that my selfishness (among other things) had to die in order to be the pastor you've called me to be. I have had to let go of plans, fantasies, preferences, opinions. And now my patterns of behavior, my comfort zone, my habits, my favorite places, my familiarity with my beloved people has to die, so that I can be transformed into the pastor of Oregon UMC.

It's hard! And it's painful. Why would we Christians ever do such a crazy thing?

I love "Hymn of Promise" by Natalie Sleeth (*United Methodist Hymnal*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989. #707). The first verse goes:

*In the bulb there is a flower;
in the seed, an apple tree;
in cocoons, a hidden promise:
butterflies will soon be free!*

*In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.*

Brothers and sisters, this is why we do it, why we submit to our callings and allow parts of us to die in the submission. ***There is a promise in that for us—that we aren't just dying, we are being reborn, transformed into the very image of our creator, who changes us from glory to glory.*** If we have gloried in our present, and are reluctant to let it go, God promises that if we do, there are more glories ahead of us. This cozy, familiar place we find ourselves is a bulb, a seed, a cocoon for what we will become. That mystery is not revealed to us yet, but in the hands of a loving, merciful, gracious God, we can trust that it will be glorious!

So let us say “yes” to what transformation God will bring. Let us let go, with a sigh of regret, but also with the joyous expectation and hope that he is doing a glorious thing in us. Our God is a transforming God! Thanks be to God for new beginnings, new transformations, and new life.