

“Be not conformed, but transformed...”

4 Pentecost 2010 (June 20, 2010)

by Robert Bowler

The Readings:

[2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14](#)

[Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20](#)

[Galatians 5:1, 13-25](#)

[Luke 9:51-62](#)

Last week, Mark preached about the mission of the church being transformation, for giving ourselves to Christ transforms us into change agents to do the work of Christ on earth. The week before that, Vic spoke of telling our stories, whether of our fellow members called by baptism into ministry or of the examples of ministry in our scripture readings. In hearing our stories, we open ourselves to God's Word and therefore the possibility of change.

Today's readings are all about personal and social transformation. The apostle Paul counseled the congregation in Rome, “Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Our lives in this world can be like a roller coaster ride, filled with ups and downs and hair-raising turns, sweet joys and heart-breaking sorrows, profound loves and vicious hatreds. Living in this world is a bumpy ride. We are constantly attracted to and repulsed by our fellow human beings and by day-to-day events. We complain about others as easily as we praise them because our fickle minds are filled with likes and dislikes.

We could renounce the world and go off and live in a monastery, devoting ourselves to God alone. But our minds will go with us and therefore we will only succeed in bringing the world with us to disturb the peace we desire. The “geographical cure” is no cure at all.

St. Paul is not telling us to run away because in fact there is no escape. His point is that we need to be transformed by Christ wherever we are. For God is in our limitations, our struggles, our loves and hatreds, working out our salvation with diligence. Christ is like the mother of the newborn child, glancing lovingly toward her sleeping babe, anxious that all will be well with her child, and when something goes wrong, she is right there to comfort and provide healing nourishment.

But we are caught up and fail to appreciate the presence of Christ in our lives. This world seems to hem us in on all sides, with its limitations, its discomforts, its impossibilities and impracticalities. But it is not the world that's the problem, it is our minds. They are in need of renewal, of transformation in Christ, for in Christ we are awakened to a world of abundance, health, energy, courage, and growth, individually and socially. In Christ our minds are renewed by the real possibility of heaven, here, now, for God so loved the world that he gave his Son to us. We need only give ourselves to him, quiet our minds' constant, tumultuous reactions to this world, and open ourselves to the presence of God.

I watched the film Avatar on Friday night. I found it a powerful allegory for the type of transformation, individually and socially, that we are called to witness to today. In the

film, greed backed up by military might seeks a valuable mineral whose extraction means the destruction of abundant life. Earth is no longer green; greed killing the planet. Humans look to Pandora, a moon of Jupiter, a lush, green world, to further their exploitation. But the natives there are intelligent and live rooted in the energy of life itself pulsing in the trees and all living creatures. They call that energy the Great Mother, and it sustains them and their whole social system. The Mother is devoted to them as she upholds life's abundance and balance. And of course, this way of life is threatened by "the people from the sky" who are blind to even the possibility of the joy of life lived in such abundance. If their blindness is transformed into seeing, as the main character learns to live the Pandoran ways, they would rejoice in the rich, green life of that land. The transformation of our minds helps us cherish all life, moves us from fragmentation to interconnectedness.

Likewise, as depicted in First Kings, Chapter 19, Elijah, found himself in a world disconnected from the One True God, a world dominated by isolation and fear. His preaching threatened Queen Jezebel's power over the people so she in turned threatened to kill Elijah and he fled for his life into the wilderness. "What are you doing here?" God asks him, twice, calling Elijah to self-examination. Elijah asserts his faithfulness and complains of his utter isolation in calling his nation to justice and faith.

But Elijah is surprised by God. God calls him out of his cave onto the top of the mountain where he is exposed to nature's power in whirlwind, earthquake, and fire, and finally God reveals his true presence in the sheer silence where the prophet hears "a gentle, quiet whisper" or a "still, small voice." "Then the LORD said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.'" The deep power of God in and behind nature, calls him back to transform the world and he is no longer alone.

We too must be transformed in our longing for connectedness, as a deer longs for flowing streams. As the psalmist pours out his soul to God in lamentation and tears, so we too cry out in prayer...

Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me. By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

It is God's song that prays in us, his depths that call to his depths, and thereby our yearning becomes our transformation.

In our second reading from Paul's Letter, the congregation in Galatia faces a world of diversity and otherness, they feel isolated in their faith. In welcoming the gentiles, the strangers, they know their congregation will change and they are afraid. The new converts of different backgrounds threaten their worship, their theology, their spirituality, their view of what it means to be a church.

What if our congregation were more diverse? What if the Baptists or Congregationalists joined us in worship as I understand they are joining with each other? Our church would have to change if we welcomed them with open hearts. Would we rejoice in the changes they would bring?

Likewise, if the congregation in Galatia had excluded non-jews, the church would not have grown to surround the globe, but remain merely a Jewish sect. Where then would we be today? The church is about transforming people, and being transformed in turn so that it may best serve the changing world. If we are rooted in God and Christ, what do we need to fear?

The Holy Spirit at Pentecost brought God's Word to all people through the languages of all hearers and thereby the church was transformed by that diversity, its identity heightened by a deeper identity in God and Christ. God is constantly calling us and the universal church to creative transformation as it grows and embraces those who are different from ourselves.

Are we an equal opportunity church? Are applicants considered for membership without regard to age, race, color, religion, sex, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or even veteran status? If so, if we are truly inclusive, we will be transformed by every person who walks through our doors. And by welcoming all who choose to join us as parts of Christ's Body on earth, we may actually learn and grow together in Christ's love to best serve the well-being of all.

In today's Gospel from Luke, the demon-possessed man lives in a world of fragmentation and alienation. He is disassociated, he has no centered personality and a diversity of selves fight within him for prominence. He needs someone to bring him back to health, to God, and to human community.

Jesus sees the divine within him and speaks to that part of his deepest self. Jesus puts him in touch with his wholeness and holiness.

Perhaps we are not so unlike this man whose mind is profoundly fragmented. We too need to seek health when our chaotic selves are jostled by the world around us, by our likes and dislikes, our roller coaster ride from day to day. We can debate demonic possession, but we cannot deny our own lack of integration and coherence, the fragmentation of our minds from each other, from nature and from God. Jesus tells the man, just as he is telling us when we slow down enough to listen, to go home. For our way home is through healing transformation into the unity of God.

Let us pray that the stories of our lectionary readings today and the allegories we find in contemporary film are enough to call us to transformation. May they inspire us to stop and listen to the voice in the silence that is deeper than the busy-ness of our lives. May we heed its call to use our gifts in confidence for the good of those around us. May our depths call out to God's depths so that we may become the change we want to see. May our congregations reflect the profound unity of nature's rich abundance. May our diversity know its rootedness in Christ's life and power. May we find health and wholeness in Christ's love for all. And may that love flow through us into our broken and hurting world whose rich, green life is threatened by our fragmented minds. For we know that it is not in our conforming to this world, but in the transformation of our minds that brings abundant life in Christ. *Amen.*