

The Transformed Christian

Scriptures: Exodus 3: 1-15

Romans 12: 2, 9-21

I'd like to let you in on a little secret of mine: Labor Day is definitely *not* my favorite holiday, nor is the end of summer my favorite time of year. Labor Day marks the end of the carefree, easy-going, lazy-hazy days of summer when you can just kick back and take life as it comes. What looms ahead of us now in September is the prospect of returning to the rat race, the highly scheduled, stressful days of fall and the rest of the year, not to mention the shortening days and chilly winds of autumn, just waiting to engulf us in their dark embrace a few short weeks from now.

And I 'm particularly anxious about the feeling that often comes over me the last week or so of August and the first couple weeks of September. Perhaps it has to do with the sense of change impending, but not yet quite here, a feeling almost like the creepy sense you sometimes get right before a storm hits. It's a sense of foreboding and dread. Bad things often happen at this time of year: hurricanes and earthquakes, the outbreak of wars, tragic deaths, and, of course, terrorist attacks. Take the history we've lived through in the 20th and early 21st Century: World War I broke out 103 years ago in August, 1914. Then 25 years later, when any of you who are in your nineties were young, World War II started on Sept. 3rd, ¹⁹³⁹, 78 years ago today. Fast-forward to the 1990's: Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait on Aug. 2, 1990, leading to the Gulf War and our subsequent unending wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 1997 Princess Di died (20 years ago this weekend) in a tragic car accident in Paris. And then who of us here this morning can forget Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001, and the devastating attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington? Those scenes of terror will be etched on our psyches for the rest of our lives. It seems as though the peaceful serenity of summer cracks apart with tragedy or decays into the turbulent decomposition of world order so often at this transitional time of year.

Do any of you recognize this feeling of "late-summer angst?" It kind of gnaws at you. Sure, you try to eke out the last few drops of summer- going down to the Cape or having a Labor Day barbeque in your back yard. But when it's tomorrow night, Sept. 4, and it's all over, you know you're going to have to wake up to the rest of your life Tuesday morning Sept. 5th, and to the sense that the world's not a great place to be living in right now, that things aren't as they used to be, that everything is topsy-turvy and undergoing lots of change, turmoil and stress.

So how should we go about living in the midst of this changing, decomposing, threatening world? How can we keep from being victimized by forces a-foot that are beyond our control? Well, for one, we could turn off the TV and stop looking at the internet headlines, stop reading the latest news feeds on ballistic missile launches from North Korea, the flooding in Houston, and the war against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. We could just try to isolate ourselves from all the bad news happening or about to happen around the globe. We could kind of stick our heads in the sand and pretend that it just wasn't there and that if we ignored it long enough it would go away and not affect us.

That would be one way... and it's a method many of us try. But the long-term results are not positive. Just by refusing to look or by running away, you don't escape the impending storm for long.

This was the method Moses was using when we encounter him in our Old Testament lesson. He was on the run, a fugitive from justice, trying to live a low-stress, low-profile life style in a land far from home. If you remember, he had grown up in privileged circumstances in Egypt, as an adopted son to pharaoh, living the good life until one day he had blown it all by killing an Egyptian overseer whom he saw mercilessly beating an Israelite slave. His instinct was to do the right thing by coming to the aid of the slave, but not knowing his own strength he had gone too far, and now the abuser lay dead, buried in the sand where Moses had tried to hide his body. But then the Egyptians had found out, and Moses had taken flight, putting as many miles as possible between him and the mess he'd left back home. He just wanted to get away, to be left alone, to let the whole thing blow over until everyone had forgotten about it.

But out there, *"beyond the wilderness,"* as the Bible puts it, at the foot of Mt. Horeb, God tracks him down. In a place so remote that no one but the sheep are there to witness, God speaks to Moses from a burning bush, telling him to quit running, to turn and face the music, because he has a task to do, and God is going to help him do it. Of course it's no small task... it just involves going right back to where he had come from, to where they were already looking to arrest him, and telling the pharaoh to "let his people go." It just means that he's going to have to put his life on the line and step out of the shadows into the limelight, as a leader of his oppressed people, God's people, whom God has decided it's time to liberate.

Yes, change was brewing. A great upheaval was about to happen. The world Moses had known was about to change, and he was going to be part of God's plan. This news didn't sit too well with him at first, as we read, and he did everything he could to weasel his way out of it. But God just kept defusing all his arguments as to why he couldn't do what was being asked of him. *"I will be with you... tell them 'I Am' sent you."* No if, ands or buts. God meant business, and Moses had nowhere to hide.

What we see in the Old Testament story of Moses becoming the leader of his people is an example of transformation. Transformation means a shift, a change of orientation, a new reality coming into being. Moses was transformed from a cowardly fugitive to a heroic leader by the power and presence of God in his life. Instead of running from the gathering storm, instead of ducking challenge, stress and danger, he faced it head on, went through it, and came out of the storm and through the Red Sea as a leader of his people on their way to a land promised them by God.

"Be not conformed to this world," writes Paul to the church at Rome, *"but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God."* If Moses had conformed his mind to the world as he knew it, he would never have believed that freedom could become a reality for his people. He would have assumed that Egypt was unbeatable, that slavery was forever, and that his people were destined for

a marginalized existence in which they'd be lucky just barely to survive. Conforming to the world means accepting what seems to be your lot in life, whether right or wrong, and adjusting your behavior and thoughts accordingly. You don't let yourself believe that things could be better or different, because you fear what would be involved in making them so. You don't have the self-confidence to see in yourself the potential to use your gifts in ways that might lead to change, and most of all you don't want the pain that certainly will come if you apply friction or pressure to the system in place.

Yet for Moses or for us to conform our thoughts and actions to the world discounts the transforming power and presence of God in our lives. *"I will be with you,"* says God to the stammering, protesting Moses. I will change the equation, I will open doors, I will even have you parting Red Seas. I will make the impossible possible. Just watch me! I'm about to bring forth a new thing. You're right in feeling a sense of anxiety from what's about to happen here. We're not just talking *change*... we're talking *transformation*! And you are going to be part of the process!

With God at the center of it, there's no telling what's going to happen! Everything is going to be shaken up, turned topsy-turvy, and made so new and so much better in the process that we won't even recognize it from the way things have been up till now. Moses came to realize this truth, eventually. Paul came to see it as well, through the difficult experience of being knocked off his horse and being temporarily blinded along the Damascus Road and then being sent by God in the opposite direction of what he'd been doing in his life up till then. Moses, Paul, and countless other people of faith across the centuries since have been transformed by the powerful presence of God at the center of their lives.

"While all events and persons around me change, am I able to change with power from my center rather than be swept along helplessly?" writes Flora Slosson Wuellner (in her essay "Transformation: Our Fear, Our Longing.") "This is the great, grave distinction between change and transformation. Change refers to adaptation, reaction, without necessarily involving any *newness of being*. Transformation involves much more than mere adaptation to outer manipulation. Transformation implies new being, a new creative energy flowing from the center that acts with creative power upon surrounding events."

For us as Christians, we believe God offers the way to a transformed life through Jesus Christ. To place Jesus at the center of our lives, and not just on the periphery, is to welcome God to come into our lives with renewing, transforming power. By aligning ourselves with the flow of Christ's life we free ourselves from the hold the world has over us, and orient our lives by a new standard, his standard. We no longer have to believe that the way things are is the way things always have to be, that the best we can expect is to somehow get by, that perhaps if we get lucky we'll survive in this world to old age, in spite of all the threats looming on our September horizon this year.

Living as a transformed Christian means living with our mind and soul open to the endless possibilities God is in the process of bringing about. No, things won't ever be

the way they used to be again. But that's O.K. They can be *better* than that. And they *will be*, if we live with Christ's loving power transforming us from the center of our being.

The marks of a true Christian, as Paul writes, are in our developing the ability to love others genuinely and to hold fast to what is good, even in the face of great adversity and threat. Christ's transforming power is at work when we bless those who persecute us, when we rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep, when we live in harmony with all God's children, as much as we possibly can, and when we find it in ourselves even to overcome evil with good. That's a tall order to fill, a mighty task to take on, living as transformed Christians in the world as we find it this September. It would be so much easier to just try tuning it all out, and bumble along with our daily life, hoping somehow to "fly under the radar." Maybe we could "get by" somehow, for a while, at least. But then what?

Or we could try refocusing on the holy, that sacred presence of God, which we can stop to look and listen for, right here, where we find ourselves today, deep down at the center of our lives.

"Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight...' When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush... (saying) 'the place on which you are standing is holy ground... I will be with you... Tell them I AM sent you.'"

May the Lord, the Great "I AM," also call us back into the world this September, and may we live as transformed Christians, ardent in spirit and rejoicing in hope.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.