

February 26, 2017
Transfiguration Sunday

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“A Good Work Begun”

The Reverend Melanie Marsh Baum



*The Road goes ever on and on down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone, And I must follow, if I can
~ J.R.R. Tolkien*

The Church of the Covenant
Presbyterian Church (USA)
11205 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44106
CovenantWeb.org

Psalm 138

¹I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise;
²I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything.
³On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.
⁴All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth.
⁵They shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD.
⁶For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away.
⁷Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me.
⁸The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

Philippians 1:3–11

³ I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. ⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

“Just the Beginning”
Psalm 138, Philippians 1:3–11

The end is where we start from. ~ T.S. Eliot

J.R.R. Tolkien’s fantasy trilogy “The Lord of the Rings” tells the story of the epic journey of Frodo Baggins. Frodo was a Hobbit whose life and world consisted of the Shire where he made his home. This was the place where he knew what was what. At the beginning of the Ring story, Frodo was in a perfect state of orientation. He felt comfortable and at ease in the world around him. He understood his place in the scheme of things. But Frodo’s life was about to change. As he took up his charge to bear the dangerous and powerful ring, Frodo would travel hundreds of miles on a perilous journey, endure months and years of devastating war, suffer inner turmoil, outer violence, and find himself beset by evil powers threatening his quest. The saga of the Ring would send Frodo Baggins into a life-altering disoriented state. Years would pass before he once again returned to the familiar and comforting Shire. When he did eventually return, though he found his quiet home little changed, Frodo soon realized that he was no longer the same. The quest of the ring has changed him, changed everything he thought he knew and understood, and it wasn’t long before Frodo realized that though his quest with the ring was at its end, his journey has only just begun. Frodo’s tale ends not as we might expect, with the Hobbit in his cottage, content with a life of quiet comfort, but with our hero boarding a ship, setting out into a new and unknown sea...

T.S. Eliot once wrote, “The end is where you start from”.

Through the past five Sundays, we have been on our own journey. We have been exploring the world of the Psalms with all of the rich lessons, expressions of faith, and human feeling they have to offer us. We sang songs of praise and thanksgiving with the psalmists when all was right with the world. We cried out with those whose lives had been upturned by the disorientation of despair and anger. We may have even begun to hear echoes of the psalmists in our lives outside these walls, when we are surprised by joy, or we navigate the waters of uncertainty, loss and fear. Joy and sorrow have been the mile-markers along our way, but we knew we could not stop there for long. “

Orientation and disorientation are never the destination; they are necessary steps along the journey toward re-orientation, toward *transformation*,” a destination, as Amy reminded us last week, that is not so much a place, but a state of mind. Here we are, at the end of one journey, and maybe we have even found ourselves transformed. We might be tempted to feel like our work here is done. That’s how it works, isn’t it, in all those old fairy stories? The Beast is magically transformed into a handsome prince; the ugly duckling grows into a beautiful swan; Cinderella becomes a princess and they all live happily ever after, the end. But this is not that kind of story. **You see, transformation does us no good – does no good for the world – if we end our journey at the point where we are transformed.**

It is when we achieve our re-oriented state that the journey of our Christian faith *begins*, again and again. Transformation is just the first part of our story. Each time we are transformed, we are called to do something new – to live from that place of altered perspective and reimagined sense of our role in the world.

This is the message of our journey with the Psalms. This is the also the message of Paul to the church in Philippi. Like the psalmist in this morning’s reading, Paul sees how God transforms God’s people, and urges them to live into that transformed state of being. The church in Philippi was a community for which Paul held great love and affection. They had seen each other through times of trial and oppression, and the church continued to support Paul, even as he was imprisoned by the Roman government. In his letter, Paul calls the church to live boldly with the confidence that what God had done in their community of faith was just the beginning, and that God had much more in store for them. Paul reminded the church that though he may not be with them in body, though they may suffer, and struggle, and be beset by enemies, God had begun a good work in them, and God would see it through.

When I attended the DisGrace conference in the fall, and more recently as I’ve been taking part in a local workshop on race, power, and privilege called PRISM, I keep finding myself having different versions of the same conversation with friends and colleagues. It goes something like this: “I feel like I’ve been blind my whole life, and now my eyes are open. There’s no way I can go back to the way things were before, even if I wanted to. There are some things that you

just can't un-see. My world-view is shifting, and I keep asking myself, "What do I do now? Where do I go from here?"

I have struggled with these same questions. I too have felt myself transformed in recent months. In one way or another, like many of us, I have felt a shift – a reorientation – of my world. It feels like this moment could be the start of something new, something big, and it reminds me of Paul's words to the Philippians. Paul's prayer for the church in his letter expressed his hope about how the good work begun by God, might find its way into their lives and actions. "May your love overflow more and more," Paul writes. Move toward love. When the ground shifts beneath our feet, when we no longer understand our place in the world the same way, when we feel that the Spirit of God is about to do something entirely new in our lives, we can put our trust in God, and step forward in love, even as we continue to ask the question together, "Where do we go from here?"

If our time with the Psalms in these recent weeks has changed us at all, how will we allow this experience to live in us? Today, as our Psalm series draws to a close, we prepare to embark on a new journey through the Season of Lent. What has gone before is just the beginning for us. Now, the question is: how will we live from this place of transformation through the next 40 days, and beyond?

First, we must remember what Paul told the church at Philippi, that **God** began this work in us, and **God** will see it through. Our role in this season is to remain open so that the Spirit of God may continue to do her good work in our souls, inspiring us to move from transformation to action.

At the end of our New Testament passage this morning, Paul moves to prayer. Prayer is a good way to begin any journey in our lives, and as we set out into a new season, prayer will be our Guide. We will focus in with a sermon series on the Lord's prayer, explore creative prayer practices in our adult education, offer meditation classes, and open prayer stations throughout our sanctuary. These elements will help to keep us present, breaking us open, and creating spaces within us where the Spirit can enter. We will take with us the lessons of the Psalms where we see some of our greatest biblical examples of people of faith assuming a posture of openness before God.

Sometimes raw, often vulnerable, the psalmists engage in ceaseless prayer to our Creator. The psalms remind us that, even in our darkest moments, God is still at work in us. We can be confident in the knowledge that God is at work in us even now. This work – this transformation – taking place within us is only the beginning of our story. What we do next, where we go from here, will truly tell the tale of how our lives have been made new.

The Reverend James Bullock Jr. and his wife felt they had done it all. After nearly twenty years of dynamic and vibrant youth ministry, having raised their three children and seen them successfully off to college, Reverend Bullock had found a calling as the senior pastor of a church he was sure he would retire in, and had begun to settle down into the comfortable second half of his ministry career. That is, until the day when Jason walked through the church doors. Jason was a troubled teen, with a difficult home life, who, through a series of unfortunate events, found himself at church one morning at the end of his rope. With nowhere to go, no family who wanted him back, Jason asked if he could come home with the pastor for lunch. By the time lunch was over, the pastor and his wife were making plans for Jason to stay the night, and it was not long after that Jason moved in for good.

Taking Jason in turned James Bullock's life upside down and inside out. Jason's story opened the minister's eyes to a world of hurting, despairing, and desperate young people in his community that he had never known existed. It transformed the way he understood the love of God, and his understanding of his own call, at a time when he felt he had learned all he needed to know about sharing the love of Christ in the world. James made a difference in Jason's life at a crucial moment, it's true, but what he was not prepared for was the difference Jason and his experience would make in his own life. He was not prepared for the journey that encounter would begin – a journey that would lead the pastor and his wife to foster more than ten other children and teenagers from at-risk backgrounds, legally adopting five of them, and mentoring countless others.

Where will our moment of transformation lead us? What journey is waiting for us? As we step out today, and see the world in a different way, may we be open to the journey God is calling us toward. May we go confident that the one who began this good work in us will see it through wherever it might take us.

Amen.