

Transformation for Forgetful People

Deuteronomy 26: 1-13

Oct 10, 2010

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WE LOVE A GOOD MAKEOVER

Does anyone remember the days before makeover shows ruled so much of the airwaves? Extreme Makeover Home Edition, Trading Spaces, Ten Years Younger, What Not to Wear, all these shows based on the simple but dramatic premise of “before” and “after”. First we meet the Before- the room, house or person who is tacky, hopelessly uncoordinated, out of date, too small or too big, or a combination of any of these. There is much eye rolling and chuckling, perhaps even some horrified gasps as the camera focuses on the individual or home in question- revealing the full impact of their enormous inadequacy- the camera doesn't lie after all. Now that we all know the horror show we're up against, the magic can begin- carpet is ripped up, and roots are dyed, furniture is replaced, and eyebrows are plucked, walls and lips are re-painted in superior colours. Oh, it's so exciting, so satisfying to see that ugly shag and that atrocious sweater heading out the door for good. And then come the best part- the reveal- the part where we get to see total transformation of the person, room or house that has been under reconstruction. When the moment finally arrives, the door is thrown open, the person walks into the room, or the camera comes across the threshold, and WOW- we can hardly believe our eyes! Who would have ever guessed that this amazing After could have come from that hum drum Before? This After picture is beyond our imaginings- hip, well matched, completely modern with vastly improved proportions. The transformation is complete and everyone is thrilled. The Before was less than impressive but the After is undeniably FABULOUS!

ISRAEL DOES NOT HAVE A GREAT “BEFORE”

We might read our Older Testament scripture this morning through a similar before and after lens. The scripture is part of a series of laws that Moses, speaking on behalf of God, gives to the people of Israel at a transformative moment in their history- as they are about to enter the Promised Land. Right at this crucial moment, God reminds them of their own Before as a people- and there’s no doubt that Israel’s Before was less than impressive. Let’s rewind a little bit through their history shall we? The Before- a wandering people- The children of Israel do a lot of wandering, beginning with Abraham leaving a familiar land and setting out, literally, for- ‘God knows where’ in response to the divine call. An alien people- Abraham’s trickster runaway grandson Jacob moves his large family and all their entourage to join his son Joseph in the land of Egypt. An oppressed people- over time, the children of Jacob grow from a cultural anomaly to a substantial minority in Egypt. Eventually, the Pharaoh begins to view them as a potential threat, and so they are thrown into bondage and condemned to forced labour. Then a dramatic escape and even more wandering- 40 years worth- before they reach this transformational moment just outside the Promised Land. So now, after all this time, after the wandering, the emigration, the oppression, and then even more wandering-the children of Israel must have been longing for this gift of transformation- they probably felt they had earned it and deserved it.

WE LONG TO BE TRANSFORMED

Aren’t we longing for transformation too? On this Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend, the majority of us know that we have plenty to be thankful for. We know that we live in a peaceful country with one of the highest standards of living in the world, and an economy , which even in these volatile times, is faring better than the rest of the G8. We know that we have clean drinking water, an abundance of food, leisure time and umpteen ways in which to

spend it. And we can easily admit that we should feel grateful for all these reasons and more besides. We can easily admit that most Canadians live already in a virtual promised land- although that is not by any means the reality for all. But despite our good fortune, we can still feel unsettled deep down, still feel that we are missing out, still feel like we are less than what we should be. If only we got the better job, or more recognition for the job we are doing. If only we were making more money, or could lose weight or put on muscle, or get back the energy we used to have- then our lives and ourselves would be transformed. Yes, we long for transformation too. You probably remember the recent troubling story about the young woman who was so unhappy with who she was, so longing to be transformed that she splashed her own face with acid, and invented a story about being attacked so that she could get a new face with some plastic surgery. She came from a good middle class family with what appears to be loving and supportive parents, and yet she did this horrible thing to herself. Her case is an extreme example, but I think many of us have felt some degree of this kind of longing for a radical change in our lives at one time or another. And though we wouldn't go to those kind of lengths, we will do things like buy a bunch of lottery tickets, work way too hard, or go on crazy diets, all in the hope that by doing so we can transform ourselves from a less than impressive Before to a truly Fabulous After. So we spend a lot of money, we spend a lot of worry, we spend a lot of sleepless nights, and we shed a lot of tears trying to get to that place.

GOD TRANSFORMS ISRAEL

I said earlier that God reminds Israel of their less than impressive Before as a wandering, alien and oppressed people. But in this reminder is also an affirmation of their Fabulous 'After', an After which only God could have made possible. You were a wandering people, but now you have given you a home. You were an alien people, but now you have been given your own identity. You were an oppressed people under the thumb of a mighty empire, but now you have been liberated, against all the odds. Who would have guessed that such an amazing

After could have come from such a hum drum Before? And all this has happened, not because you earned it or deserved it. Not because you were strong, not because you were clever or beautiful, not because you were more righteous than any other people. No, all this happened first and foremost through God's grace, because God chose you. All this happened through God's transformative power working for you and through you. And now that you have been transformed by God in this way, the proper response can only be, gratitude, thanksgiving. A thanksgiving that celebrates the After without forgetting the Before. A thanksgiving that pours out in loving service to God, and to neighbour, especially to those neighbours who are homeless, alienated, oppressed, *just like you were* before God offered you that strong hand and that mighty arm.

GOD TRANSFORMS US TODAY

God's grace in the Exodus transformed Israel and called forth their gratitude. God's grace in Jesus Christ, himself a child of Israel, extends that transformation beyond Israel's borders to us and to the ends of the earth. You feel you're wandering aimlessly through life, Jesus gives you the purpose of Christian discipleship. You feel alienated and isolated by a culture that worships individualism, Jesus welcomes you into the body of Christ. You feel oppressed by expectations that have everything to do with achievement, performance and production, Jesus loves you for who you are. That scenario of divine transformation and human gratitude is the story of our faith, not just one day or one weekend a year, but every day of our lives. Ok, I've said it, but does it really happen today- are people's lives really being transformed by God, by Christ, right here, right now? Just this past week I was speaking to a friend who was telling me about one of the young people from my previous congregation and how six weeks at a United Church summer camp has changed his life. Jason is a highly intelligent, creative, sensitive, musical boy, who is also quite possibly the quietest teenager I have ever met in my life. If you had met Jason, you would sense that there is all this good stuff inside him, but that he hasn't quite discovered how to let it out. Jason has attended the same camp for three

summers, but this past summer was his first year as a staff member. By all accounts from his family and his friends, he has come back a changed young man. He still has all those same lovely qualities as before, but now, now he talks, he initiates conversation, he mentors younger kids, he prays- *out loud!* At last, all that good stuff we knew was inside him has been released, and it's coming out in a kind of flood. If that isn't an example of God's transformative powers at work, I don't know what is! And Jason's response to that transformation has been gratitude- he wants to be involved in leading worship, he wants to mentor the tweens in the congregation, he wants to keep sharing God's love with kids in Christian camping.

When we live a life of faith, when we are attentive to God's presence in the world, when we are part of a community of faith, we can trust that we too are being transformed for a life of Thanksgiving. I tell people who ask me why in the world they would want to be a Christian- "You're going to like yourself better, you're going to like the world better. You're going to find you're less afraid and more compassionate, less self-centred and more generous. You're going to find yourself involved in ways and doing things you never thought you'd do before." That 's the kind of transformation and gratitude we can anticipate as those who believe in God, follow Christ and rely on the Holy Spirit. Transforming a room can be done by an interior designer, transforming a house by a building contractor, transforming a wardrobe can be done by a fashion consultant, and a body by a personal trainer, but transforming a people so that they are free to live a life of Thanksgiving, that can only be done by God, and it happens all the time. Thanks be to God, AMEN.