

A Transforming Gospel
Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11

Back in the 1500s Ignatius of Loyola, a dedicated/zealous soldier, and one who lived a wild lifestyle, was struck by a cannonball, and nearly lost his leg. While recovering, Ignatius began reading about the lives of a number of saints and eventually he decided to move in an entirely new direction - living his life for Jesus – just as those saints he read about. He gave all of his possessions away, and traveled across Spain to Montserrat, a mountaintop where hundreds of years earlier (@1025 C.E.) the Benedictines had established a monastery. Once there, Ignatius spent much time in prayer and then took out his sword he had coveted as a soldier and placed it at the foot of a religious shrine at the monastery. Ignatius literally disarmed himself, shifting from a soldier of war to a pilgrim for peace. It was an act signaling a radical transformation, a shift from a life dedicated to violence, to one devoted to the ways of nonviolence and peace. The transformed Ignatius went on to found the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits.

Those who embrace, those who embody, those who espouse a life of discipleship frequently find themselves following one of two separate aspects of their faith journey:

On the one hand, the disciples who identify with human need, with the struggles of daily living, and in their deepening relationship with their Creator, may find themselves confronting God - and questioning where he is in the midst of life's uncertainty, suffering, and pain. "Where are you, God, when we are facing injustice and enduring times of grief? Where are you when an earthquake or flood hit an impoverished country? Where are you when life seems more than we can bear?"

On the other hand, there are those who embrace discipleship that struggles with life and faith's perplexing questions. Much like Ignatius, they will experience a remarkable transformation of life, anticipating much more to come. They are convinced that something radically new is unfolding in life...It's God's new creation based upon justice,

compassion, mercy, and peace - and so they invest their time, their energy, and their resources in living and proclaiming this new reality. They announce a transforming gospel.

The ancient Israelites, as you look at their story, their history, you see how they faced difficult times of judgment and exile. After years of unfaithfulness, the people saw their beloved homeland and temple destroyed, and they were forced to live in the enemy territory of Babylon. However, while in Babylon, a new prophet came, Isaiah, who envisioned something markedly new in the works and began to speak God's words of forgiveness. Isaiah gave voice to the promise of new beginnings for the exiles. Isaiah prophesies for God:

A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isaiah 40:3-5). Something new is happening!

See, I am doing a new thing. Now it springs up, do you not perceive it? (Isaiah 43:19).

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light to the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49:6).

By the time the prophet speaks the words recorded in chapter 62, the exiles have returned to their homeland. But they become discouraged and disappointed, as they soon realize that their beloved city remains broken. "Where are you God?" Sadly, destruction continues to dominate, continues to be the rule of norm - as the temple remains unrepaired.

In response, Isaiah speaks to the dire circumstances of the people, to their hurts and hopes, crying out to God,

“For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem’s sake I will not remain quiet, till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch” (Isaiah 62:1).

It’s as if the prophet is questioning when God will make good on God’s promises. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us that in our prayers, in our dialogue with God, “nothing [is] out of bounds, nothing [is] precluded or inappropriate. Everything properly belongs in this conversation of the heart. To withhold parts of this life from conversation is in fact to withhold part of life from the sovereignty of God.”...It is perfectly acceptable, Brueggemann is suggesting, to give voice to our questions and struggles, to ask of God, “Where are you in the midst of our pain? How long, O Lord, before you act in our world?”

...Not only does Isaiah raise these questions for God;...Isaiah moves on, affirming the conviction that, though we may not yet see it, God is nevertheless working, working, working - in the business of re-creating life. Immediately after crying out to God that he will not rest until God acts, Isaiah announces that God will in fact turn toward the people. *“The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow” (Isaiah 62:2).*

Being called by a new name - that signals there is a new character, a new level of relationship with God, a new future in the making. Instead of calling Israel “Forsaken,” Israel receives a new name indicating that God delights in the people. Instead of calling the land “Desolate,” Israel shall now be called “Married,” signifying God’s commitment

to the covenant, to a new future and a deepening relationship with the people. It's a reminder that ours is indeed a God of transformation, and yet that transformation - that new life - seldom occurs on our time schedules, but rather on God's.

Perhaps you remember the story of Martin Luther King, Jr., soon after being called into leadership during the bus boycott in 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, he found himself the recipient of numerous death threats - as many as a dozen every day. There were times when Dr. King found it all so overwhelming. One night in particular when he returned home at midnight, after receiving yet another hate phone call, he found himself too scared to sleep. It seemed the final straw, as King considered not only the demands of leadership, but also his wife and infant daughter sleeping upstairs.

He made himself a cup of coffee, put his head down on the kitchen table and began to pray. King recalled lamenting to God, "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

At that moment, recalls Dr. King, he experienced a sense of God's presence as never before, and he could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying, "Stand up for justice, stand up for truth, and God will be at your side forever." Almost at once King recalled his "fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything." Something new is unfolding.

Three days later King's house was bombed, his family narrowly escaped. When angry and nearly riotous crowds of supporters gathered at the front of his house to demand protection for the movement and an end of racial segregation, King sought to channel their understandable anger in a new direction. Issuing a call to nonviolence, King said to

the crowd, "We must meet hate with love. If I am stopped, this movement will not stop because God is with the movement. Go home with this glorious faith and this radiant assurance." He reflected later, "A night that seemed destined to end in unleashed chaos came to a close in a majestic group demonstration of nonviolence."

It was in a time of intense turmoil and inner distress that Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized his need for a strength well beyond his own, and it was then that God heard his cry. A comforting voice assured Dr. King that he could indeed go on, that God would be with him, that King could continue to live and proclaim the demands of the gospel for justice and compassion, for nonviolence and an end to oppression.

In an article entitled *Everything Must Change* Brian McLaren wrote that the gospel calls for a sweeping new way of life. McLaren wrote,

A revolution of hope makes radical demands of us. It requires us to learn new skills and habits and capacities: the skills of a new way of seeing, the habits of a new way of thinking, the capacities of a new way of living.... It is not a new system of belief parched into an old way of life; it is a new way of life that changes everything.

Surely that's the power of this morning's Gospel lesson from John, chapter two, the noted story of Jesus changing water into wine. You will recall that John begins his Gospel, with well-known confirmations: *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, we have seen his glory; in him was life, and that life was the light of all people; the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it; the true light that gives light to every man, was coming into the world* (John 1:14, 4-5, 9)...As John's telling of the Gospel unfolds, he reiterates that the light of Christ opens a way for us to live in love and peace rather than fear, hatred, and violence.

John lists the first act of Jesus as attending a wedding in Cana, after he had called a small band of disciples. In ancient Palestine, a couple celebrated their wedding not with a honeymoon but with a seven-day feast at the groom's home. But this particular celebration is in trouble because the wine is nearly gone, well before the party is over, a crisis that would cause the family deep embarrassment.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, sees what is happening, and asks Jesus to help. There seems to be some reluctance on the part of Jesus. He tells Mary somewhat bluntly, *"My time has not yet come"* (John 2:4). Yet, when Mary persists, and Jesus acts showing early on that the grace of Jesus comes as an extravagant grace. Indeed, the wine steward, who knows nothing of the interaction between Jesus and his mother, is astonished at the quality of the wine and exclaims to the groom, *"Everyone brings out the choice wine first, and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now"* (John 2:10).

Not only is the wine of extravagant quality, but also extravagant in quantity. Six stone jars, each holding 20 to 30 gallons of water, now overflow with the finest of wine. It's a lavish gift, a gift of extravagance, a gift that comes when most are least expecting it...Is this not often our experience as well? In our times of grief and loss, when we little expect God's extravagance, grace breaks into our lives. In our times of fear and uncertainty, when we cannot see beyond our anxiety and pain, we may well find ourselves surprised by grace and transformed by a love that knows no limits. In our times of weakness and confusion - times when, much like Martin Luther King, Jr., we find ourselves feeling as if we do not have the strength to carry on - a transforming presence may well touch us, carrying us forward with renewed courage, strength, and peace.

The Gospel proclaims the good news that Jesus is in the business of transforming human life. John suggests that the transformation of water into wine is the first sign, or symbolic action, revealing the true identity, the glory, of Jesus. John will include six more signs in his Gospel - a total of seven - each reminding us that Jesus, the light of the world, has entered into our world of darkness, bringing forgiveness, healing, hope, and a new way of living. Jesus comes, able to transform human life and make it new. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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