

A Living Hope

Sermon 72 | Greystone Baptist Church | September 13, 2020 | Heritage Sunday 36
1 Peter 1: 3-9, 13-16

Last Saturday afternoon my family and I stood on the back porch and watched with bated breath as our baby butterfly spread his wings and flew away. This exciting event was the culmination of a much longer journey with this butterfly. It really started (for us at least) when my mom started sending daily pictures and videos of caterpillars laying waste to her butterfly bush. Each day they grew bigger and bigger, just like the Eric Carle taught us in his book, *The Hungry, Hungry Caterpillar*. After they'd eaten their fill and just about demolished mom's plant, they formed the most beautiful green cocoons with silver dots along the bottom and a thin, silver line near the top. After the chrysalids were all formed and safely fastened to the underside of leaves on nearby plants, my mom clipped a few of those leaves off and brought them inside for observation. We were fortunate to receive one of those chrysalids from her and we watched it closely for the next nine days as we waited for signs of transformation and new life.

Monarch butterflies spend an average of nine to twelve days wrapped up in their cocoons. Nine to twelve days! This may not seem like too terribly long, but their whole lifespan is only about 9 months long.

If the average lifespan of a human being is somewhere around 80 years old, that's a rough equivalent of 7 years. That's a long time to be "in transition." Perhaps this is why the butterfly has become such a popular symbol of change? It is much more comforting to watch and observe something else go through a beautiful transformation than to endure our own long seasons of life-altering change.

When Peter writes to the churches in Asia Minor (the letter now printed in our Bibles as First Peter), he is writing to people in the midst of great change. Peter's original readers are first generation Gentile converts trying to live their new faith in a secular world and under Roman rule. Some of these early Christians experienced state sanctioned violence while others were ostracized from their families and communities, all because of their treasonous claim that Jesus Christ was Lord which insisted that Caesar was not. Their new-found identity as followers of Christ meant that their ultimate loyalty would now reside at the throne of God. The Emperor did not appreciate that.

Worldly rulers seldom do. And it makes sense when you think about it, because the goal of Caesar, the goal of Empire is to keep everyone in line, to reinforce the status quo, and to protect the economic structures that uphold their established hierarchies of wealth, class, and power. But Jesus' message undermined all of that. It resisted the comfort (for some) of business as usual and insisted on divine transformation which would re-structure and re-organize this world to make it look more like the Kingdom of God. Jesus demanded change.

Dr. David Brubaker at Eastern Mennonite University¹ says that change is so hard because it calls into question our identity and power within the system. When things change and we are forced to adapt, we struggle to know who we are in relation to everything else and we want to know how we fit into the new world order.

God calls us to a different kind of security, one that is not born and cradled in the safety of social class, economic stability, or political influence. God calls us to die to all of those false promises and to be reborn as followers of Jesus, citizens of God's Kingdom, champions of the poor and marginalized not only in the sweet by and by but in the very present here and now.

You see that process of being reborn isn't just about our eternal salvation.

It is also about our ongoing transformation.

Like a caterpillar in its cocoon, we are being transformed into something totally new.

This transformation often starts with some kind of spiritual awakening, a moment in which we realize just how broken we are. In those moments of despair, we find comfort and hope in the promise that God is always with us. I can imagine those Christian converts to which Peter writes the words we read today. I imagine them feeling like we do after a great youth retreat, an encouraging devotion, or an empowering conversation with our friends. In those moments we know that all will be well, that God is with us, and that no matter what comes our way, we're going to make it through.

But then we get back to life and our attempts to live as disciples of Christ seem to get lost in the never-ending struggles that come our way. Money is tight, relationships are strained, the future is uncertain.

In times like these, when everything around us seems to be falling apart all we want is for things to be back like they were before. Before the accident, before the pandemic, before the cancer, before the affair, before the protests, before the miscarriage, before the news, before whatever interruption came and stole our hope away. Like the early Christians we find ourselves at a crossroads of past and future. Born into the love of Christ, confident that one day God's going to make it all OK, but still caught in the struggle of the present moment with nowhere to turn and no hope to be found.

We're stuck, hanging on by a thread like a caterpillar in a cocoon on the underside of a leaf just waiting to see what happens next.

As I watched the monarch chrysalis these last several weeks I couldn't help but wonder how much the caterpillar knew about the change that was taking place. As the body went through complete transformation from one kind of creature to a new one altogether, did

¹ Brubaker presented this as part of a webinar on conflict and change, sponsored by the Center of Healthy Churches, moderated by Bill Wilson. 9.3.2020.

the mind of the caterpillar understand what it would become? Did it struggle within the cocoon? Or did it wait peacefully, resting in hope for all that was to come?

From our perspective the transformation of a caterpillar to a butterfly is full of hope and excitement, but I have to wonder if it feels that way from inside the tiny cocoon.

We are living in a time of great change. A global pandemic has interrupted and reshaped every rhythm of life, work, travel, and play that we knew just 6 months ago. Economic structures are shattered, career paths interrupted, and over 900,000² people have died as a result of this new virus. As if that isn't enough, there is a national election coming up and a nationwide movement for racial justice afoot. There is so much change happening around us right now and all of it pulls us in a million directions demanding that we place our allegiance with one side or another, each one claiming opposite solutions to the same problems... each one promising a false hope and superficial identity.

As Christians living through this season of great change, we are called to remember where our first allegiance belongs, and that allegiance is only born within the heart of God who created us in the Holy Image, who taught us how to live at peace with one another, and who offers us new life when we allow ourselves to be transformed from the ways of Caesar's Empire into the ways of God's kingdom where all are welcomed, all are fed, all are healed, and all are at peace with one another.

Sometimes that kingdom vision seems so far off from our current reality, that we begin to lose hope that it is even possible.

But then I remember that beautiful butterfly that flew away from my porch last weekend after all those long days wrapped up in a cocoon, delicately strung to the underside of a leaf.

And I wonder if the same God who created caterpillars that turn into butterflies might also be watching and working... Perhaps even shaping a new creation - within me, with you, within us?

What a shame it would have been if that butterfly had emerged from its cocoon only to crawl back in trying become what it used to be.

We would have never seen the wings grow stronger, and the little legs start to crawl up the leaf...

We would never have known the weight of the butterfly on our fingers or the joy of seeing it take off into the afternoon sky...

...We would have never known the full beauty of its transformation.

² World Health Organization. <https://covid19.who.int> , retrieved 9.11.2020.

Isn't the same true for us?

Here on this Heritage Sunday as we remember our 36 years of ministry, we can bet that surely there were times when it would have been easy to resist change and refuse transformation. But where would we be today if we'd let our fears keep us from becoming who God was urging us to become?

I wonder if Dr. Lewis, the Pastor at First Baptist who first issued the invitation for our founders to set out on the journey that would eventually become Greystone Baptist... what if he wrote us a letter during this season of struggle and transformation, like Peter's letter to the churches scattered throughout Asia Minor... what would it say?

Perhaps something like this...

Dear Beloved Congregation at Greystone Church,

Grace and peace to you in this unusual season of life together. In such days it seems nothing is how it used to be, or how you imagined it to be. But remember always that in Christ, resurrection abounds! Where there seems to be only death and loss, God breathes new life. That is your story as sisters and brothers in Christ. So do not be discouraged if you are struggling now, because you can rest assured that while you endure this season of transformation, God is busy shaping and molding you into New Creation.

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; practice your faith, stretch, grow, and learn so that your life will bear witness to the living hope that withstands every trial and tribulation. Do not succumb to the solutions and pathways the rulers of this world have to offer, but always look for holy resolutions to every struggle. You have among you and within you everything it takes to endure this season... and where your confidence runs out, the Spirit will make up the difference. God is still using you to bring a Gospel hope into our world.

You are, each and every one a living stone, a piece of the foundation of God's Kingdom being built here on earth, therefore live as one who has faith in God's unfolding creation.

Love always, live in peace, and when you can do nothing more, rest in God's love ... knowing that you are being made new.

Like the caterpillar in the cocoon, it may not seem like much is happening these days of waiting and longing to return to normalcy. We're stuck at home, we can't engage in our community the ways that we so love to do. But it might do us well to remember that our God is a God of active and rest-less creation... and that the Holy Spirit, just like the caterpillar in the chrysalis, is never simply biding time... but always working to reconcile all things into Holy New Creation.

And perhaps in our struggle toward new life, God is actively infusing us with a living hope, ready at any moment to spread its wings and fly.