

“Doing a New Thing”

Isaiah 43.18–25

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 19 February 2006

Most people don’t really like change. Most of us prefer stability, even if it means being stuck in a rut. I imagine that when this second part of Isaiah’s prophecy was written, there were some of the people of Zion who were happy enough living in Babylonian exile. They had been there for 70 years and had established a new and mostly comfortable life; they were (like many of us) fat and happy. To the exiles a return to a devastated Jerusalem probably seemed like a test of their faith, rather than a jubilant homecoming. But God was about to do a new thing with them.

We may not like change...but change happens. We get to a point in our lives when something becomes intolerable to us – for some of us it happens with just a little pressure and others wait until they’re near the breaking point.

- We hit bottom and find our way to an AA meeting.
- The emotional patterns we learned in childhood don’t work anymore, so we get into therapy to learn new ways of behavior that enhance our current relationships.
- We realize that we are not alone and that we need to connect with a community of faith, so we find a church or synagogue.

Sometimes it takes a bit of chaos to spur us on to make a change. This happens to individuals, it happens in congregations, and it even happens to nations.

Either gradually or suddenly, transformation happens.



As part of Plymouth’s strategic planning process, we used parts of a book by Kirk Hadaway, called *Behold, I Do a New Thing: Transforming Communities of Faith*¹. Hadaway describes a three-part series of actions in the life of a vital church: inviting, transforming, and sending.

We *invite* people into this community and let them know who we are, what we’re all about, and ask if they’d like to journey with us. The second phase is *transforming*. We expect that people who come to Plymouth (which means all of us) are looking for something different to happen in our lives, and that occurs as we each live within this community. *Sending* involves going beyond our own congregation to enact our faith, which can be through commitments to social justice and peace, inviting others outside the community in, or making the presence of God manifest in some other way.

We liked this *inviting-transforming-sending* model so well, we incorporated it into Plymouth’s vision statement!

I want to focus on the second phase: transformation, or doing a new thing.

Some of you may remember a sermon I gave last year that attempted to reclaim the word *repentance* from fundamentalism. This morning, I’m going to attempt to rehabilitate another loaded word that you may find off-putting: *conversion*.

When I say *conversion*, what images does that bring to mind? Perhaps a bolt from the blue that causes you to feel born again? Maybe being “slain in the Spirit” and falling over backwards? I don’t discount those experiences, but I also know that not everybody has them.

¹ Kirk Hadaway, *Behold, I Do a New Thing: Transforming Communities of Faith*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001)

A UCC colleague of my once said, “I’ve been born again...and again...and again.” He was describing the *process* of transformation, which for him was more about the journey than the destination.

So, if someone asks whether you have been saved or born again, you might think about it before replying. Have you ever had an experience that was truly transformative – whether in the pew, in solitude, in nature, wherever? Have you changed the course of your life in some way in response to your faith? Has your awareness of world events changed? Have you become willing to work for systemic change for the working poor and the homeless?

Part of the transition is called Christian formation. Kirk Hadaway writes, “Learning the way of Christ is not exactly like learning a new skill, a new language, or even a new culture. It is more like being transformed into a Mexican. A shocking exposure to Mexican culture is not enough. Understanding the language and customs is not enough. To be a Mexican, I have to feel like a Mexican, think Mexican thoughts, and generate new thoughts and behavior that are my own but have a Mexican flavor. I must be transformed into a Mexican. We must be transformed into Christians who incarnate the radical, ever-changing, ever-constant spirit of Christ in our own way.”²

This is the season of Epiphany, marking a time when three Gentiles had an “Aha!” moment and their lives were transformed in response. What epiphanies have you had? And how have you responded?



The idea of conversion was central to our Puritan forbears. In fact, it was essential for full membership in many 17th-century churches. In 1679, John Cotton wrote, “The practice was for men orally [women in writing] to make confession of faith and a declaration of their experiences of a worke of grace in the presence of the whole congregation, having bin examined and heard before by the elders in private and then stood propounded in publick for two or three weeks ordinarily.” (When we receive new members next Sunday, we won’t be doing that.)

Only full members at that point could have their children baptized and receive communion, but you’ll be happy to know that those limitations were relaxed at the end of the 17th century. Solomon Stoddard, who was minister at Northampton, Massachusetts for 59 years (!) introduced “open communion” to all in attendance just before 1700. (To put that in perspective, I’m still not officially welcome to receive communion in the Roman Catholic church, but there are plenty of priests who, in practice, welcome all.)

We have all but dismissed the idea of conversion in progressive churches. In some ways, that is really okay – I personally don’t want to use it as a litmus test for membership. But, we also should be careful about throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We need to open our minds and our hearts to sense when God Is Still Speaking. And we need to open ourselves to the possibility of being transformed by an experience of the sacred.

One of the questions asked of ministerial candidates is whether they feel called by God to ordained ministry. *Called by God*. While few of us have received a fax or email from God inviting us into this vocation, most of us have had some transformative experience of the sacred. For me, it was when I was reading a book by John Dominic Crossan. I felt a physical “ping” and it occurred to me that perhaps I should consider ordained ministry.

Few of us join Plymouth because we want to stay just as we are. And very few of us join because we think it’s a ticket into heaven.

² *ibid.*, p. 121

It's really important to recognize that churches are not businesses. We have members, not customers. As management guru Peter Drucker once said, "The business of a church is to change people; the business of a corporation is to satisfy them."³ Do you hear the distinction? It would be difficult to be prophetic and simultaneously "satisfy our customers." In fact, I would say that if a minister doesn't tick *someone* off every now and again, he or she isn't doing their job. You know the old saw: "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable."

"Offering ministries as consumable goods in order to 'feed' members changes the nature of the organization and undermines the purpose of the system," Hadaway claims. "The product of the church is transformed lives – not quality ministry. Ministries help transform people and provide channels for living transformed lives."⁴

I have seen lives transformed here at Plymouth:

- people connecting with the sacred for the first time
- gay, lesbian, and bi folks finally coming home to a church that accepts them
- people who have been helped through an illness or crisis by the prayers and efforts of fellow members
- two members who have sensed a call to ordained ministry and are getting ready for seminary in the fall.

It isn't so much what happens here as it is the results that follow. If we allow ourselves – if we open ourselves – to the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, incredible things happen. They may not be things you want to happen; you might need to make sacrifices. (It usually doesn't work like that book *The Prayer of Jabez* claims: *say this incantation every day and you'll become prosperous*. That is magical thinking and consumerism, not theology.)

Returning to our text from Isaiah, do you think God is active in pinpointing us and saying, "Okay, Hal, be a minister"? It's entirely possible. There are times though when I think God is calling all of us and each of us to new, transformed lives, but we need to lower the defensive barriers around us to let the transformative power of the Holy Spirit work within us and through us.

What new thing is God trying to do with you? Can you open your heart and mind enough to let God in? Can you relax and breathe and discern where you might be drawn?

God is indeed trying to do a new thing with us as individuals and also with us collectively as a congregation. May we lower our barriers and welcome in the Spirit. Amen.

³ *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 18