

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Images of Jesus: Transformer
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Exodus 6: 1-8; Ephesians 1:3-14

This morning we continue our four-part series on the “Images of Jesus,” today viewing Jesus as transformer. For those of you who were here last week, you’ll remember that John said the scripture he was reading from Colossians was packed full. Well, here we go again. As we read today from Ephesians 1:3-14, consider that in the original Greek, this was written as one long enthusiastic sentence of 202 words ... the longest sentence in the New Testament. Gratefully, the translators broke it down into smaller sentences. Listen for God speaking...

Ephesians is the most impersonal of Paul’s letters, as he was not addressing any particular situation or crisis. This letter was intended to circulate among the churches of Asia Minor, and is a bird’s-eye view of one theme after another. It is rich with some of Paul’s reflections on God’s purposes for the world. It is challenging to reflect on today’s scripture without preaching into the whole letter, so just to give you a launch pad (should you want to delve into the whole letter when you get home), chapters 1-3 tell the story of God, and chapters 4-6 spell out the nature of our participation in greater detail.

Today’s reading, the opening piece of Ephesians, is a kind of “table of contents” to the rest of the letter. It is also a prayer, a prayer which begins and ends with praising and blessing God for what God has done, is doing, and will do. Hidden within this prayer is the story of Exodus. God chose Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to be the bearers of God’s promised deliverance and redemption for the world and to be part of God’s plan to rescue that which became broken through human rebellion. We, too, have been chosen by grace, not for our sake, but for the sake of what God wants to accomplish. By using the word “we,” Paul is including all who believe in Christ. Those who believe in Jesus are now part of the fulfillment of God’s purpose, and that includes us. Just as God chose the Israelites to be God’s people, God has now adopted us as God’s children through Jesus Christ.

We are all familiar with the patriarchal structure of Biblical times. In ancient Roman law, the family was based on the father’s absolute power. The father had power over his daughters until they were married and had power over their sons as long as they lived, and everything they owned belonged to the father. Sometimes, in order to carry on the family line, an elaborate process of adoption was carried out. When someone was adopted, they acquired the rights of their new family and gave up all rights to their old family, including any inheritance. Legally, they were considered a new person.

This is what Paul is saying God has done for us. We are a new creation in Jesus Christ. The allusion to Exodus says that we, too, were in bondage. Not to Egyptian tyranny, but to the ways of the world. And this is the new Exodus, the new inheritance, and the new wilderness wandering. “Paul sees the church doing what Israel did in the desert: coming out of the slavery of sin through God’s action in Jesus the Messiah, and on the way to the new promised land.”¹

We were under the power of sin and of the world ... and through Jesus, God took us out of that power and into God's. This adoption wipes out the past and makes us new. We have been transformed in Christ. God's choice of Israel did not depend on their impressiveness or righteousness, and God's choice of us certainly does not depend on our impressiveness or righteousness. But now, in Christ, God blesses us as God once did Abram. God destined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ.

Hopefully, we each have a personal relationship with God. But today Paul is calling us beyond that to also be the Church. The Church has been called to make known by word and example the forgiving, healing, and unifying love that is ours in Christ to all the world. And just as the wandering Israelites were led by the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, so we are led by the Holy Spirit.

The mystery of God's will has now been revealed. It is to bring the entire universe - heaven and earth - into unity in Christ. We are part of God's great initiative of redemption, reconciliation, and the healing of God's broken world. In Christ, we have been given a part in God's eternal plan. God has drawn us into God's work of uniting all things in Christ. We are not incidental to God's story. By grace, we are participants in God's story, sharing together in God's work of redemption in Christ. This gift of God, which was given to the first few, is meant for all. Paul continually invites us to see ourselves, and God's work among us, as a community of people, for this story is to be lived as God's people.

I often reflect on the story of my life as a Christian, how my faith and relationship with God has evolved, and how it has affected me. I am so grateful! But Paul is calling me to step back and realize that this is God's story and I am but a part in it. "I" am a part of "we" and we have been chosen by God to be a part of God's unifying plan for the cosmos. With this gift comes responsibility. We are to live as representatives of Christ. We need each other to do what God has called us to do. We cannot do it alone.

Thankfully, God has not left us alone to our own devices, nor are we here without meaning and direction for our lives. We have been marked with the seal of the promise of the Holy Spirit. We belong to God. We are a new creation. In Christ, we have been transformed. We are a part of that new formation to whom Paul writes – the Church. As the Church, everything we think and say and do should represent God. The Holy Spirit will lead us. And we can be the people we are made to be.

May it be so.

¹ *Paul, The Prison Letters*, N.T Wright, 2002