

March 5, 2023
“Living Your Best Life: A New Life”
John 3:1-17
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Saturday mornings at my house, you are likely to find HGTV playing on the television while I'm cleaning or working around the house. I love to watch the hosts take a property and transform it into something new. Will they “love it or list is?” What will the “property brothers” do this time? How will Hometown’s Ben and Erin recreate a home for their clients? Sometimes, when they go from the “before” to the “after”, the change is almost unfathomable. The house is nearly unrecognizable, and it has been transformed into something entirely new.

The problem with these shows, though, is that I wonder how often that they are so obsessed with the “outside” that they forget that true, lasting transformation takes place from the inside out. If all they’re doing is covering up problems to make the house pretty, the transformation doesn’t last. What’s the phrase? Like putting lipstick on a pig?—it may be prettier, but it's still a pig.

God wants to transform our lives from the inside out—to give us a new life through the transformation of our hearts and lives. He doesn’t just want to paint over the problems, He wants to take our lives and transform them completely into something new—an abundant life, lived in grace and love—a happy life based on the promises of one who never lets us down—a peaceful life that comes from knowing that God has claimed us as His own and will never let us fall. A New Life.

Change doesn’t come easily. Although there are a few people out there who love change and thrive on it, most of us hate it. In fact, researchers tell us that we are hard-wired to resist change. Our minds see it as a potential threat. This is what makes change so stressful, even when they are good, positive changes.

Psychologists tell us that the top stressors in our lives are 1. Death of a loved one, 2. Divorce or Separation, 3. Moving, 4. Illness, 5. Change in a job (whether voluntary or not)- Retirement falls here. Marriage is also high on the list. (<https://psychcentral.com/stress/top-10-life-stressors-that-can-trigger->

[anxiety](#)) Some of these are great, positive events. Things that we want, but they bring with them a lot of change and uncertainty—a need for re-creation in our lives. These are the times that the former things are stripped away and we must learn to live anew.

We will all face times in our lives when the timeline of our lives seems to tear into a before and after. When I was younger, I used to think that life was just a series of choices- I will choose the right school, the right mate, the right job, and to live in the right house. I will choose when and if I will have children. And, I used to think, “if I make all the right choices, I can avoid pain.”- who am I kidding? I still get caught in this trap sometimes- thinking that if I can just make all the right choices, I won’t face heartache, or pain, or loss. But, then, that isn’t the way life works is it?

We don’t have to live long before we find out that we can’t avoid pain and stress. Sometimes we make the choices that change our lives, and sometimes, those choices are made for us- by spouses who choose to leave, by bosses who “let us go”, by bodies that fall ill... These are the times when that line between before and after can be hard to see, but these are the times where Jesus lives.

It’s not hard to understand why we resist change, even positive ones, but as I Googled, “Do people like change?” this week, I found lots of articles telling me *why* people hate change. The top 3 reasons are 1. A lack of reward, 2. Fear of the Unknown, 3. Loss of Status (<https://climb.pcc.edu/blog/why-do-people-hate-change>) . In other words, we resist change when we don’t see the reward in it. We resist because we aren’t sure what it will mean for us, and it often throws our lives into some manner of chaos. And, we resist because we might lose some of our status.

The amazing thing is, that even a few thousand years ago, Nicodemus seemed to be resisting change for all the same reasons. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He was one of the rulers of the Jewish people, and he had clearly been following what Jesus was teaching and preaching- and he must have been intrigued. So, he came to Jesus. In fact, we’re told that he came in the dark, presumably so that he wouldn’t be as likely to be seen by his fellow Pharisees. Jesus was someone who associated with the least, the lost, and the lonely. He wasn’t someone who could help Nicodemus’ status—in fact, he’d lose his standing with the other Pharisees if he believed in and followed Jesus. This would bring about so much uncertainty in what’s next.

So, as Nicodemus came to Jesus, we can imagine that he had his guard up, and we can tell that he doesn’t fully believe by the title that he gives Jesus- not Lord, not Son of God, but Rabbi- Teacher. He says to Jesus, “Teacher, we know that you come from heaven because you are doing all these signs and wonders.” There seems to be an unspoken, “but” here. Like, “But, are you really the Son of God?” Jesus answers his unspoken question, saying “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again or from above?” The Greek could be translated either way.

Now, Nicodemus either intentionally misunderstands Jesus or does so because he isn’t quite sure what he believes, and he asks Jesus, “What do you mean born again? How can a person be born again?”

I think that this is a fair question. You can see how he might be confused—or how he might choose the confusion—but Jesus isn’t about to let him off the hook. He says to him essentially, “God’s spirit is here. I came so that you could have a whole new life, one that comes from above, one where you are filled with the Spirit and set free.”

Nicodemus is still trying to figure all of this out. He’s confused, but what I love is that he comes to Jesus during this time to ask him questions. He seeks Jesus out.

John Maxwell once said, “Change is inevitable. Growth is optional”. Nicodemus seems to be looking for growth, seeking guidance and understanding, and Jesus is saying to him there’s something better than what you know now. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus would have known many rules to follow that were supposed to bring you closer to God, but Jesus is saying that there’s a new way. Instead of rules, there is the Spirit, there is freedom. And, this freedom, this spirit, this new life, comes as a gift- a free gift offered to each one through the life and death of Jesus.

“Change is inevitable, growth is optional” for us too. We know that there will be changes in our lives. Some we choose, some that are chosen for us. We know that there will be moments when our lives will be broken into the before and after. The question for us is, how will we navigate those changes? Will we be bound by rules, or will we allow the God of love to give us freedom? Can we open our hands to let go of the before so that we can receive the gift of grace and love and blessing that God wants to give us in all the afters? Too often, we hold so hard to the past, to the before, that we have a hard time grasping the blessings that stand before us.

Helen Keller once said, “When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us.” (<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/3443-when-one-door-of-happiness-closes-another-opens-but-often>).

This might seem a bit trite. A bit on the “look on the happy side of life”, but there’s a bit of truth in here. We can’t look back so long that we, like Lot’s wife in the Old Testament, turn into a “pillar of tears”.

We have to let go of what we thought that our lives might be so that our hands can be open to receive the gifts that God wants to give us in this moment. We can say to ourselves, this is hard, this is tough, I hate this change, but I know that God is here with me and that He will never fail me.

In our Scripture reading today, Jesus tells us that He can offer healing and hope through this new life. In verse 14, Jesus says, “just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life.”

Jesus is referring here to a time recorded in Numbers 21. The Israelites were complaining so much about having been brought out of slavery into the wilderness that they were speaking against God. And God “sent” poisonous snakes that bit them and many died. But, God told Moses to create a serpent and hold it up on a staff. Whenever the people looked at the bronze serpent, they were healed. Jesus was saying that He would be lifted up on the cross so that we could find healing and new life, and eternal life every time that we lifted our eyes.

But, in order to receive that gift, we have to lift our eyes to God, to open our hearts and hands, to reach out, step out in faith. Abram, in our Old Testament reading today, stepped out in faith as he heard God calling him to a new place. He had to leave all that he knew, and he did it- seemingly without blinking. Why? Because he knew that God was with him and promised to bless him. Did this mean that all his problems would be solved and he’d live a charmed life? No—but it meant that wherever he went, God would be with him. And, if Abram/Abraham hadn’t been willing to let go of the past, he never would have gotten to the promised land.

Does this faith come easy to us? This willingness to let go of the past, to be born anew, and to follow wherever God is leading? No, for most of us, it’s not an overnight or instantaneous transformation.

There’s a story that I’ve heard about a man from long ago who had never seen an elevator before traveling to the city with his son one day. As he stood in the lobby, he watched with wonder as an old

woman, wrinkled and bent from life, entered the elevator and the doors closed. A few minutes later, the elevator doors opened and a young, “beautiful” woman got off the elevator. The man looked at his son and said excitedly, “Danny, Go get your mother!”

The kind of transformation that God wants to work in our lives often doesn’t come as quickly and easily as an elevator that magically turns back time. Rather, God works in our lives over time to shape us into the image of Christ, to transform our lives as we take one step at a time.

It can be frightening to trust in God, to follow where He leads, to allow Him to shape and mold us and our lives into something new. But, here’s good news— we don’t have to know everything about what lies ahead of us, we just have to take the next right step. And then the next. And then the next. Kate Bowler describes it like swinging from vines, taking the first leap and trusting that as you hold onto that vine, another will appear and another and another. Someone else describes it as driving at night. Our car headlights can’t show us the whole road ahead. We see just a part of it. And, we trust them to show us just what we need to take the corners and travel down the road until our lights show us more.

This faith, this trust, this hope is what brings true happiness into our lives and gives us lives of abundance. It’s what it means to be born from above. To open our hands and our hearts to a God who offers us wholeness and healing. This is the life that Jesus wants to offer to you. One that is filled with hope and love and peace that no matter what comes, you are held, you are not alone, you are loved. This is what it means to be born anew, born from above. To step out in faith, to allow the Spirit of God into your heart, so that you might know a “new life” in Christ

This is transformation. This is change. It’s not necessarily a quick change, or an easy one, but it is given to us freely, as a pure gift. “for God so loved the world that He give His only Son, So that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but will have eternal life” (John 3:16).

And, when we give our hearts to God, God promises to transform our lives. Not that we won’t have hard times, but that the hard times will be easier because of the one who overcame death to give us eternal life. Be ready- this isn’t just a cosmetic change, a change on the outside, but an enduring change that begins on the inside, in our hearts and souls.

To return to our house analogy.... In *Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis writes, “Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

God wants to bring you new life. To create a place beyond your wildest dreams. And, he wants to come and be with you.

Now, that is transformation.

Invite to pray with open hands:

O God- my life is a real fixer upper right now, but you see the potential. With my hands and heart open today, I give myself, my life to you, trusting that you will transform me, renew me, and refresh my spirit.
Amen.