

## **Transformed**

A sermon for Proper 16a - August 23, 2020

St. Andrew Lutheran Church - Franklin, Tennessee

Isaiah 51:1-6; Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-19 - Julian Gordy

"The Lord will comfort Zion; and will make her wilderness like Eden," the prophet says.

Blessed are you Simon, now, you are Peter, the rock, and on this rock I will build my Church, Jesus says.

Be transformed! St. Paul says.

There is a lot of transformation going on in our lessons today - deserts to gardens, hard-headed disciples into sturdy pillars of the church, you and me into living sacrifices with renewed minds, a new creation that God is bringing about in the cosmos.

Transformation. It is what most of us long for. Personal, community, national, global transformation. Change from the inside out. Change from the broken way things are to something that is new and fresh and good and just.

And while transformation is the work of the Spirit, given the imperative command in the reading from Romans, it seems that you and I have a part in it. We can, at the very least, stand in the way or not. And it seems clear from Jesus' words in the gospel reading that we who stand in the tradition of Peter and the apostles, we who are the inheritor of the keys to the kingdom, we who are Christ's church also have some role to play in transformation God is bringing about in the world.

Fifteen years ago, when these were our readings and I was the relatively new pastor of this congregation. I told a story of transformation that I hope those of you who were around then will find worth hearing again. And those of you who weren't, I told this story then and tell it again now in the hope in it you will get a glimpse of the kind of transformation St. Paul writes of and Jesus speaks of and you and I are called to participate in, and that in that glimpse, you will be

encouraged as you live out your part in the work we have been called to do together.

In 2001, a tornado devastated tiny Isola, Mississippi, a town in the delta, one of the poorest places in North America. Nearly every building in town was damaged or destroyed by the storm. But much bigger towns were also hit by the storms, and so Isola - whose very name comes from its isolation - was not the sort of place that got much attention.

But it happened that this disaster struck at the same time the Lutherans and Episcopalians in Mississippi were organizing something called Lutheran/Episcopal Disaster Response.

During the summer that followed the storm, Hal a Lutheran lay person living in Mississippi and Horace a Mississippi Episcopal priest learned that little Isola was still a mess months after the storm. So they gathered a group from the brand new Lutheran/Episcopal Disaster Response and headed to the delta town.

When they got there, they found a town whose people were defeated, depressed and near despair. Most of Isola was still in ruins. FEMA and the Red Cross had done some initial emergency work but were now long gone, and no one had the money to rebuild or the will to try.

After their initial visit, Hal and Horace began to invite repair teams from churches across the country to come to Isola and help. Groups would have to come at their own expense, provide their own food, bring their own tools and even buy their own building supplies. That is not much of an invitation, but congregations responded.

Lutherans and Episcopalians - young and not-so-young - came from Indiana, Georgia, California and other states. The largest crew to answer the call was a group of 100 Presbyterians from Houston. They rode up to the Delta in buses with banners which read: "We're on a mission from God to Isola, Mississippi."

The first work crews were housed in the dormitory of Mississippi Delta Community College, a small institution in nearby Moorhead, MS, that was closed for the summer. The church folk cleaned up, rebuilt, painted, insulated, roofed and repaired one home after another. They rebuilt churches and shops.

Now at first the people of Isola were skeptical, even distrustful of these do-good strangers. "Why would they be doing this?" they wondered. They assumed the crews would work for a few days and then be gone. But gradually, as things began to take shape and the volunteers didn't leave, even in the delta summer heat (in fact, more of them kept coming) the folks of Isola began to join in the reconstruction efforts. Hal says you could see hope beginning to bud like the desert in our first lesson.

When the Houston Presbyterians were ready to go back home, the mayor of Isola, William Tanner, met with the city leaders and decided that they should throw a party for these friends before they returned to Texas. There was no money in the city treasury for such a feast, so the townspeople took a collection and went to catfish processing plant, the only industry in town, and bought fresh fish.

The men of Isola cleaned and fileted the fish and fried them up in the basement of the all-white First Baptist Church. White people and black people together cooked and served a feast. The minister of the all-black Baptist church and the minister of the all-white Baptist church, in this heretofore still mostly segregated town, served as chief cooks, standing side by side around a gas-fired deep fryer.

The next day, as two buses of Presbyterians rolled out of town and back toward Houston, Hal and Mayor Tanner stood on the sidewalk, arms around each other's shoulders - two men, one Southern black Baptist, one Midwestern white Lutheran transplant - tears rolling down their faces, waving to a hundred church folk who had in the course of a couple of weeks become family.

After the Presbyterians left, some of the more well-off people in Isola formed their own disaster response group to help restore the destroyed homes of their poorer neighbors. One of them said, "If church people from California and Texas can help our neighbors, I guess we can too."

Does it look like to you that transformation was happening in Isola?

Not long after that, a group of Episcopalians came all the way from San Francisco to work. By this time school had started and the college dorm was no longer available for housing. Mayor Tanner offered to put the volunteers up in the newly restored black Baptist church where he is a member. (Which is more appropriate than you can imagine, since the name of Mayor Tanner's church is the Strangers' Home Missionary Baptist Church!)

Problem was that there was no facility for showering at the church, and in the late summer heat in Isola, a shower after working all day is not exactly a luxury.

So the mayor had an idea. They had just installed a brand new fiberglass baptistry in the church. Why not outfit it with a shower head and the folks from California could shower in the baptistry?

Now Hal, good Lutheran that he is, questioned the propriety of showering in the baptistry. But Mayor Tanner, who turns out to be an insightful theologian, responded, "Well, if that's not what baptism is about, I don't know what is." And so, the Episcopalians from San Francisco slept in the Strangers' Home Missionary Baptist Church and showered in the baptistry.

And not one bit of that baptismal imagery was lost anybody.

These church people who volunteered for LEDR helped transform Isola. And not just physically, but they they helped bring the people of Isola together and they helped restore their hope.

All that happened nearly twenty years ago. I don't know what has happened in Isola since then, but I know this bit of transformation, however long it may have lasted, was the Spirit's work, and that church folk who were willing to be part of that work helped bring about some transformation in that small Mississippi town.

St. Paul tells us that we who name the name of Jesus as our Lord are not to be conformed to the standards of our age with all its divisions and hard heartedness, with its arrogance and greediness and grasping and hoarding. We are to be transformed by the renewing power of God, to give ourselves away as living sacrifices to the transforming work God is up to in the world.

Of course this transformation is not an instant process. It isn't even a constant process. We make a little progress and then fall back. We run hot and cold.

Still, it is we who have been baptized and gathered into the church that God has chosen to be Christ's transforming presence in the world. God has placed the keys to the kingdom in our shaky hands, has brought us together into community and named us "church," people who are called out and called together and invited to participate in the Spirit's holy work of transformation. Amen