

Extreme Transformation

4th Weekend of Easter – May 6/7, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Romans 1:8-17 (NRSV)

⁸First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. ⁹For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, ¹⁰asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— ¹²or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish ¹⁵—hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

Stories of profound conversions are popular. We like to see what God can accomplish in a person's life. No follower of Jesus has had a more extreme makeover than the apostle Paul.

Saul the persecutor

Born in Tarsus, a city on the Southern coast of Asia Minor, Saul had moved to Jerusalem while a young man. There, he pursued his education and excelled. Making his place among the Pharisees in Jerusalem, young Saul's intellect, energy, and zeal attracted the attention of Gamaliel, one of the most respected teachers in all Israel. Saul advanced fast, beyond what was achieved by most Jews of his age. His devotion to the teachings and traditions of Israel were matched by few. Saul zealously kept the Hebrew law, considering himself to be blameless. In short, he was a "super-Jew."

Thus, it was no surprise that Saul put his energies to work ridding Israel of Jesus-followers after the crucifixion of the blaspheming pretender from Nazareth. Saul would later acknowledge that he violently persecuted the Jesus-movement, seeking

Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome

Paul's letters, comprising 13 of the 27 New Testament books, are correspondence written for specific occasions. In each case, Paul is writing to real people, in real situations, and to instruct and encourage the Christians through real problems.

Paul's letter to the Romans is the only letter he wrote to a Christian community he had not founded. In the letter, Paul tells them that he plans to visit them on his way to Spain, plans that go unfulfilled due to his later arrest in Jerusalem (Acts 21 and forward).

Paul knows many of the Christians in Rome. For example, he sends greetings to Prisca and Aquila whom he met in Corinth. He is sending the letter with Phoebe, a deacon in another Christian community.

Paul writes this letter to address disunity among the Roman house churches. Jewish-Christians have recently returned to Rome after having been expelled along with all the other Jews in 49AD. Now that they are back, they find that the Gentile-Christians are running the show and, not surprisingly, divisions ensue.

Thus, Paul writes a thoughtful and comprehensive letter reminding the Jewish-Christians that God has taken the Gentiles into the family with the same status as the Jewish-Christians. And Paul reminds the Gentile-Christians that God has grafted them onto the tree of which the Jews are the roots (Romans 11:11-24).

Trying to persuade the Christians to live together in harmony, Paul mounts a vigorous defense of God's righteousness, his covenant faithfulness. God made a promise to Israel and, as revealed by the cross, God has kept it – through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Further, the reason God made a covenant with Israel in the first place was so that all humanity might be reconciled to God. In short, Paul argues that God has been faithful to the Jews and merciful to the Gentiles.

Paul's letter is lengthy and difficult. He does not want to rely on bare assertions. Instead, he carefully builds a compelling argument that he hopes will help these Christians to embrace their lives together in Christian fellowship.

If you would like some help comprehending this enormously important letter, you ought to get N.T. Wright's two-volume commentary, *Romans for Everyone*. He provides his own translation and works through this letter piece by piece in a very understandable (yes, even enjoyable) style. There is a copy in the St. Andrew library. In addition, his full-blown commentary on Romans is part of the *New Interpreter's Bible*, which is also in our library.

to destroy it – thoroughly and quickly. Saul was present at the stoning of the first Christ martyr, Stephen, holding the coats of those who threw the stones. But Saul would soon be thrust into his own extreme makeover.

Paul the apostle

While on a trip to Damascus to round up some of the Jesus-followers, Saul was visited by Jesus. Saul saw a blinding light, fell to the ground, and was asked point-blank by Jesus, “Why do you persecute me?” At Jesus’ instructions and though temporarily blinded, Saul made his way to Damascus where a Christian named Ananias, doing himself as he was instructed by Jesus, laid hands on Saul. He was then filled with the Holy Spirit and restored to sight. (Acts 9). Saul would soon learn what God had told Ananias: Saul was the one God had chosen to take the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles.

Lest this get too confusing, Hebrew children born away from Judea and Galilee were often given two names at birth, a Hebrew name and a Greek name. Saul’s parents also gave him the name Paul and it is that name that Paul takes on as he begins to carry out the vocation given him by God – being God’s messenger (*apostolos*) to the Gentiles.

Paul was a perfect choice for the job. As a Pharisee trained under Gamaliel, his Jewish credentials were unassailable. But he was a product of the Greco-Roman world having been born and raised in Tarsus. He was equally comfortable among the temple leadership in Jerusalem as he was in the streets of the Greco-Roman world. He was knowledgeable about the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle. Paul was blessed with a powerful intellect and enormous energy. He had a trade, tent-making, that he could use to support himself.

Extreme, but not easy

From violent destroyer of God’s church to God’s apostle to the Gentiles. We’d be hard pressed to find a more dramatic conversion story than Paul’s or one with more far-ranging consequences. God worked powerfully in Paul, using him to shape the faith that has been passed on to us.

But this was not easy for Paul. He spent nearly fifteen years after his conversion learning and working among the Jewish followers of Jesus before undertaking his first missionary journey in the late 40’s AD. Throughout his three decades of ministry, Paul would constantly have to defend himself against the charge that he was a second-class apostle because he had not been among Jesus’ disciples before the crucifixion. Paul would endure numerous beatings, stonings, and floggings. He was shipwrecked three times and suffered terribly on his many journeys. It is estimated that he traveled more than 10,000 miles, most of them on foot. (See esp. 2 Cor. 11:16-33 for more on Paul’s sufferings as an apostle.)

And like the rest of us, Paul struggled to live out his faith, to live as the person God had called him to be. Paul knew that God had made him into a new person, but he also knew that he had his own work to do in this. If you ever get discouraged about the difficulties of living out your own discipleship, read this from Paul (from Romans 7:15-25). Bear in mind, this was written more than two decades after Paul encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus and after the completion of several missionary journeys.

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. . . . Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Paul writes dramatically and frankly about his own inner struggle and, by extension, the inner struggles of us all. He delights in the law of God but knows that he is at war with himself (v. 22-23). This doesn’t mean that God is not working within each of us to move our extreme makeover forward, but it does mean that God does not wave a magic wand. It is more like working with a fitness trainer than a plastic surgeon. Our makeover may be more or less extreme, but it is never easy.

Because God can and does work with such power in our lives, it is very tempting to say to someone one, “Come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved.” But Paul’s experiences and our own caution us that the life of authentic discipleship is not like that. The truth is that God often opens our eyes to the war within ourselves, while assuring us of the victory that will one day be fully ours.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

May 7 - 13

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.
Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p>Day 2 Romans 9-11; Proverbs 21:17-31 Paul confronts the question of whether God has been faithful to Israel</p>
<p>Day 3 Romans 12-13; Proverbs 22:1-16 Paul speaks to the community about unity, worship, facing the outside world, and love</p>	<p>Day 4 Romans 14-16; Proverbs 22:17-29 A specific call to unity in the community; Paul's travel plans; greetings</p>
<p>Day 5 Ruth; Proverbs 23:1-18 The wonderful story of Naomi and Ruth from the time of the judges.</p>	<p>Day 6 Ephesians 1-3; Proverbs 23:19-35 The first half of Ephesians is about the meaning of Christ for the Christians and for the entire cosmos.</p>
<p>Day 7 Ephesians 4-6; Proverbs 24:1-22 The second half of Ephesians is about how the meaning of Christ should affect Christians' behavior. This is pastoral theology - holding together head, heart, and hands.</p>	

Sermon Notes

May Book Recommendation

***Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, by N.T. Wright**

Even a casual reader of these studies has probably noticed how foundational Bishop Wright is to my work and my understanding of God, Jesus, and the Bible. A couple of months ago, Bishop Wright released a new book that I will recommend first to anyone, *Simply Christian: Making Sense of Christianity*. This is an introduction to Christianity unlike any you've read. Wright makes the case for the Christian claims and explains in simple, yet beautiful, prose the story we tell about God and his creation.

In the blurbs, William Willimon, formerly the chaplain at Duke Seminary and now a UMC bishop, writes, "We have no better interpreter of the faith than Tom Wright. *Simply Christian* is an amazing testimony to the vitality and truth of the Christian faith and to his skill." As Anne Rice (yes, the vampire lady turned novelist of Jesus) writes, "N.T. Wright is simply crucial; his writing can transform one's life."

I hope you will find time this summer for Bishop Wright's book. It is both an easy and a thought-provoking read. I'm pretty sure that you will never see your faith in quite the same way again.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

All of us would like to transform some aspect of our lives. Perhaps it is our career or our marriage or our relationship with our children or family. And all of us know how hard it is, how hard it is to make a transformation that lasts.

But perhaps our *Extreme Makeover* isn't really about fixing this part or that part of our lives, but transforming our very being . . . remaking us from the inside out. Paul appeals to his Christian brothers and sisters that they would be "transformed by the renewing of your minds." Paul wants them to present their bodies (their whole selves in the Greek, not just their flesh-and-bones) as a "living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1-2). And if this makeover is about our whole selves, then "fixes" of one problem or another become the result of a larger transformation.

Have you experienced a large transformation in your own life? Do you know someone who has? Do you know the story of someone who experienced a transformation that rivaled Paul's? What do these stories have in common? Once the transformation begins, how can we ensure that it continues? What is our part? You might read on in Romans 12 to see what Paul considers to be the marks of genuine discipleship. Paul knows that, as difficult as it may be at times, we are called to *do* love, to "overcome evil with good."