

## **The Mystery of God's Dwelling in Transformation**

Rod Hollinger-Janzen, December 15, 2013

God is transforming hearts and lives. God's love and energy floods dry places like a rain storm and sets the desert to bloom. God enables strong and weak alike to walk safely on the Holy Way, joyful and singing. God's transformation is indeed a reality even today.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the vision for transformation that we have heard through the poetry of Isaiah 35. Jesus tells us that he came to give life in abundance, in fullness. Jesus shared his Spirit with the disciples to transform them from frightened and defeated people at the crucifixion, to fearless messengers and demonstrators of God's love in Christ after the resurrection.

Pastor John (I changed the name) was voted in as President of a Mennonite Church in a country I often visit. There was a lot of conflict and recrimination which accompanied the transition between former and current leadership. Perhaps it was because of that, that during the first years of Pastor John's term, I experienced him as an impatient, driven man who had little confidence in those around him. Perhaps it was that he was the proud owner of a doctoral degree, which put him into an elite category of highly trained church professionals, giving him the cultural right to treat others as inferior to himself. I do not know what it was. But John routinely ordered others around, expecting them to jump at his every command. He rarely consulted when making decisions, but decided things on the spot and then let people, including the others on the national church leadership team, know how it was going to be. When he left the headquarters to pursue other business, everything came to a halt because he had disempowered his team and they feared taking any initiative without him.

Here was a man who had given his life to Jesus Christ, been baptized, received high level pastoral and theological training, and had served the church for years.

During the years I have known him, great tragedy struck twice. First, his wife of over 20 years passed away very suddenly. I know he suffered the loss deeply. Then later, a 20 year old daughter also became ill and passed away.

I recently spent 5 days at church headquarters with John and his team. During that time, the first thing I noticed was that rather than speaking to me in private, he gathered his team, and we all engaged in conversation together. He did not interrupt team members but allowed them all to express themselves fully. He also added to the conversation when he felt so led. When decisions were needed regarding a church institution, rather than making it himself he took the time to call several representatives of the institution and had them engage in conversation before a decision was made. Prayer was more a part of the meetings that it had previously been. The man seemed at peace with himself, relaxed, open, forthright. I had never seen him that way before. In speaking with others, I learned that these positive changes were being noticed throughout the church. Something had happened. Somehow, the Spirit of God had intervened in his life and had transformed his outlook and behavior in significant ways.

When I see these kinds of dramatic changes in peoples' lives, I can get envious. What exactly has changed? How did it happen? What is the formula, the magical short cut that could bring that sort of change to me?

I expect that at least some people here have made Christmas cookies in the last week or two. Raise your hand if you did. Did you use a cookie cutter? If you did so, all the cookies come out looking more or less the same, right? This is not how Jesus works at transforming us. He's not looking for rows of gingerbread people sitting in church!

Jesus' way of healing and transforming is not automatic in its approach. Rather, it is specific to the needs of every person, as personal as our own identity, and takes into account every twist and turn of our lives. Also, I believe that this salvation that Jesus brings is not a once for all event, but a lifelong process which is linked to our relationship with him. This process of saving and transforming is mysterious and hidden in many ways, and we receive it as a gift because it is NOT our own accomplishment or power that does it. On the other hand, we do participate with God in the process of transformation, though the initiative and action belongs to God. God invites us again and again, in many different ways, to open ourselves to God's love, to God's communication with us. We can grow in our ability to notice these invitations and to respond.

We are in Advent, the season when we celebrate God with us, Jesus come down to earth to live with us. John 1:14 states, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us". One could also translate this, "The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us". This takes us back to the Tabernacle in the desert experience of Israel. The Tabernacle was the dwelling place of God with Israel in its wanderings. Jesus' sojourn on earth performed a similar function. This "dwelling of God with us" in Jesus is one of the greatest events in the Christian story. However, at this point in my Christian journey, just as amazing and mysterious to me is the reality of Jesus now living within you, within me. When we become believers, we often use this language of indwelling, and say that "I've invited Jesus into my heart". As a church, we imitate scripture and say that we are the body of Christ. This image implies that Christ continues to live on earth through his people and by His indwelling Spirit. Paul talks in different letters about "Christ in you, the hope of glory"; or, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me".

The reality that Christ lives in you, in me, gives our lives meaning and purpose far beyond what they would otherwise have. It connects us intimately with God's purposes for our lives and for the shalom of the entire earth. Our very being is "a dwelling place for God". Through an oft-sung hymn we pray, "Come abide within me, let my soul like Mary, be thine earthly sanctuary". When we give ourselves to Jesus, accept Jesus into our heart, that's what happens. Our soul becomes a place where Christ lives. Scripture also talks about our body being the temple of the Holy Spirit- or one could say, the temple of the Spirit of Jesus. In some kind of lesser but parallel fashion to Jesus himself, who Tabernacled with us, we also carry God's presence, are His temple. Because of this, God is able to use us in ways that we know, and also in ways that are just as real but are hidden from our consciences. One thing is sure- because Jesus lives in us, we are being led into His kingdom purposes, into our deepest reason for living.

This is why each one of us is being transformed, step by step, into Christ's image, as Paul tells us in II Cor.3:18.

Christ lives in you, in me. Think of how deeply God must love us, must trust us, in order to live within us! God works through us through our daily routines, through conversations, actions, work, play... in little ways and in big ways. I am slowly learning to pay attention to little things, to understand that God often works in ways that seem insignificant at the time. It's like a mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds. But when it is planted it can grow into something large and good and fruitful.

Christ lives in you, in me, and he is constantly extending invitations to transformation. Many of these invitations are small, and they can easily be missed, overlooked.

We can learn to pay attention, to grow in our awareness of what God is doing in us and with us.

It is true that there are obstacles to our desire to grow in our awareness of God. Our passage mentions "those who are of a fearful heart". Fear has many different forms, and it can get in the way, it can impose itself between ourselves and God. I believe that as we are able to pay attention to our fears, to identify them and to notice the effect they have on our lives, this can open us more to Jesus' healing transformation.

- At times I fear change, because change brings uncertainty. Sometimes I find myself content to leave things as they are, even if they are far from what God desires for me, because it is easier for me to deal with what I know, than with what might come if I try new ways of being. When I am in this frame of mind, Jesus can show me a new approach or idea for a problem or a relationship, but I will refuse because I prefer what I perceive as security, more than the risk that comes with change.
- I also sometimes fear getting closer to Jesus. It's like any relationship in that sense. If you get closer to someone, their expectations might grow, they might begin to count on you for things, and before you know it, you are caught in a web that is controlling you. So I maintain what I think is control by keeping my distance.

Despite these defense mechanisms, God keeps on taking the initiative. Sometimes God completely surprises us with something out of the blue. A few years back, I joined with a group of people. Together we committed to Bible study, prayer and helping each other in our spiritual walk. In a group like that, you would think, and I too would think, that spiritual riches would come out of scripture, the prayer time and sharing. And they did. But the most spiritually revealing moment for me came when I suddenly became aware that I saw myself as superior to another member of the group. Somehow I had the good sense to bring this new awareness to my spiritual director, whose wry question was, "So, you think this is the only place where you harbor spiritual pride?" A bit of honest reflection and I soon had to admit, "no, it's not." At the time, it was a humiliating and painful revelation to me. But I also believe that it has led to a deepened relationship with Jesus, more dependence on Him, a more realistic understanding of who I am in my relationship to Him and to those around me. I now believe He had been trying to get me to pay attention to this issue for years. Now, finally, I had started. I had been blind, and now the Holy Spirit opened my eyes. When God's transforming power comes, the eyes of the blind will be opened. I

used to think that these transformations were grand and glorious. I did not realize that humiliation is sometimes necessary as a part of transformation.

I am quite sure that there are still some things in my life to which I am quite blind. God, increase my attentiveness to you. Let me see myself more as you see me. Give me the gift of sight, so that I can see myself, and also see You.

Might you in some way also be blind? May Jesus lay His hand on each one, and heal.

Here is how Isaiah, ch.50, describes the “suffering servant” whose description fits our Healer Jesus so well.

“Morning by morning [God] wakens- wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught.

The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.”

God awakens Jesus’ ear. In terms of his inner attitude, Jesus listens with the attentiveness of a good student, wanting to learn, knowing that there is LIFE in that learning. Jesus was not in a formal school setting during his time as God’s suffering servant. He was in the school of ordinary life, the school of life with God. So what was he listening to? What was He listening for? He says, because God opened his ear, he was not rebellious, he did not turn backward. Jesus grew into his vocation, into what God intended him to do, through listening. I expect that Jesus listened for God- in scripture, in nature, in people, in songs, in stories, in events and activities. He was listening for those things that God was drawing him to, the things that his own soul resonated with most deeply, the signs that lead one forward in one’s calling, into what God most wants you to do.

You and I both know: it is possible to listen, and still be deaf. We can hear the words, and still not grasp what is there for us. A neighbor can speak to us, and we can completely miss that it is God sending us a message through that neighbor. A spouse can speak, and the mate responds with words, but the content in, around and under the words has been completely bypassed. God can use television shows, newspaper articles, internet communication, nature to get our attention. Are we listening?

We can grow in attentiveness, we can grow better at listening to God, to others and to ourselves as we struggle to find where our deep joy best meets the world’s need. The desert places in us can become full of streams and blossoms as God leads us through transformation. God promises us that the deaf will hear. What a gift, a blessing, a reassurance that is! God loves me so much that God will patiently lead me from deafness to hearing.

Our inner transformation is not indifferent to our relationships, our community or our world. As our freedom to live with Christ and for His purposes increases, God’s love will flow through us to others in multiple ways, in ways we are conscious of and in ways that we are not. We will receive invitations to love- how will we respond?

Nelson Mandela is being buried today in South Africa. He is someone who, out of great inner freedom, responded generously to the invitation to love, and changed the world by doing so. After being released

from 27 years of prison confinement orchestrated by the proponents of apartheid, one of his first acts was to go to the home of the widow Vor Vooerd, wife of the deceased architect of the apartheid system. He sat down and had tea and conversation with her, thereby demonstrating his forgiveness and his willingness to recognize the humanity of those who had caused him so much suffering. Through a series of remarkable acts such as this, Mandela transformed the attitudes of many, and saved untold thousands of lives who otherwise would have been killed in a violent backlash against apartheid evil.

There is an old camp song that I used to sing: "let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me". I believe that this is the direction of an authentic Christian spirituality, in which God's transforming work in each of us, empowers us to share what we have received with others, until we arrive at the Beautiful City where God and the Lamb will be our constant light, and God will wipe away every tear; death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more; because God is making all things new.