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A Mission for the Church

3. Those of Us Who Know

Isaiah 40:3-7, 55:12-13 A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. 4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. 5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." 6 A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass."For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."

Did you hear it? The Lord said: *"All the trees of the fields shall clap their hands.... Instead of the ...brier shall come up the myrtle."* But wait a minute -- I hear this little voice inside myself saying -- I don't like myrtles! And cypresses are sloppy! I'd really prefer a nice pine tree or better yet even a rock garden that I don't have to mow or water, or feel guilty about when I do neither. And the Lord said: *"And the mountains and the hills shall burst into song."* But I think to myself: well, I sure do hope that when those songs burst forth that they are the great hymns of the church (or at least the hymns I grew up which therefore defines, of course, what "great" means!). And the Lord said: *"[A]nd all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."* And I say, OK, they can clap, but only if it is dignified Disciples-style clapping -- and certainly no "Amen's"!

Do any of you, like me, sometimes meet the advent of new possibilities with a list of reasons of why you won't like those new things? I suspect all of us are that way sometimes. And we have certainly had reason in the last year to flinch at the prospect of change, haven't we, rather than welcome it! Two fires that were so devastating, and in the last ten days rains and flooding that has no equal in the history of Colorado and which has left us without words at the changes wrought by this destruction. And, of course, this is not even to mention the kind of garden-variety, everyday changes that make us not feel particularly welcoming to yet more change: like when the bank sends us a letter saying they are closing our branch in order to serve us better. Or when our cell phone mysteriously upgrades itself and loses our information and presents us with something new to learn that we weren't particularly seeking! I'll bet you can add your own examples of changes that seem to make life more annoying, and I'll bet you can understand why an announcement of yet more change may not necessarily seem like good news!

Yet, here's the reality: Change will find us whether we like it or not. The small changes of life will continue to be our companions, and the large and even sometimes unwelcome changes will continue to surprise us. And that is true of church too. That is true of the culture around us that sets our context for doing church. Such changes have happened and they will continue to – and our job, as we continue to reflect on how we can continue to be a “missional church” in this third of our September sermon series on the subject, is not to lament those changes, not to huddle up and pretend they are not the case, but to say, as that wonderful hymn of the church has it “new occasions teach new duties.” If we are to carry out our mandate from Jesus Christ to find the lost

and the hurting and the lonely and those abraded and abused by the culture and by other experiences of religion that have bashed on them, then we need to continue to figure out what sort of attitudes and actions we need to have so that we can truly fulfill Jesus' great commission to find these folks and His great commandment to love them.

How do we do that? Well, let's turn back to Isaiah and we will discover something key: that there is **a difference between change and transformation**. Because, you see, in the midst of hard times or even just puzzling times, when God is trying to break through and do radically new things, "**change**" is just not enough. It's too flabby. It's too puny. You see, the difference between change and transformation is this: We are on our way to being transformed people when we **expect** God to move miraculously among us, making us into whole new beings, giving to us all new desires and dreams. Not what I am "comfortable" with, not what is my taste, but what **God** is passionate about. Not my will, but Thine. **We are on our way to being transformed when we welcome that!**

This morning I want to simply name two ways that I believe that God is indeed continuing to call us to be transformed people. The first is for us to always remember that we have been called to do the one job that no other organization, no other group can do. We are called to present and re-present the **gospel** in all our actions and in all our words. I shared this story a few years ago with you, but one of you lately mentioned it and asked me to share it again, and it is indeed apt for this morning: Anthony Robinson tells the story of how at the dedication of a new youth center in his community, a pastor had been invited to speak. The mayor of the community was also there, and after the dedication ceremony, he said this to the

pastor: “...I appreciate all your efforts in getting this center opened.... But you are a Christian minister and I didn’t hear you say anything that couldn’t have been said by someone else. We need to hear something different from you. We need to hear the gospel.”¹

We need to hear something different from you! My friends, that also applies to you and to me. Now, there are indeed so many of you that do so many good things for the world; the mission-mindedness of this congregation and the outreach that we do is indeed amazing. And so many of you also do so many things as individuals that help people. Thanks be to God for that indeed. But let me suggest that part of being a missional church is both show AND tell! For if we do not also give equal attention to telling and saying **why** we do these good and Godly things — **because we are Christians and the gospel calls to do them!** — then we will have missed an opportunity. God calls every single one of us to be about acts of love and justice and radical hospitality, but we must say **why**, we must talk about **why** it is we are doing these things! Every occasion for outreach must also be an opportunity for evangelism - - because we thereby show that it is **God** who has joyfully transformed us. And if we do **not** speak about **why** we do what we do we have missed an opportunity. The job of the church is to do that which **only** the church can do — which is to testify through deed **and** word to the Gospel of Christ. Show and tell, show and tell.

The second way that the prophet Isaiah shows us the difference between mere

¹Anthony Robinson, “Renewed Life: Seven Ways to Change Congregational Culture,” The Christian Century Vol 117, No. 32, November 15, 2000; p. 1186.

change and transformation is through God's persistent work to inspire us to be a true community of joy. Because being a Christian, reaching out to those hurting, those abraded, those who need to know a saving word, is not simply an earnest and serious enterprise. No, we reach out in those ways because we have been transformed in this church into a true community of joy indeed. What is the secret to that joy? Well, I think there are several factors that we can point to. But one that I think that is most important is that I think we have increasingly all realized that worship is not about us, not about our tastes, not about what we like or don't like. And that allows us to indeed be joyful – for as I tell staff, using Barbara Blaisdell's wise reminder, when we plan worship, every service needs to have some hymn or song that you hate because that means it is likely just the thing to speak a word of hope to someone else! Another factor in our continuing to be transformed into a community of joy lies in something that one of my seminary professors and mentors, Clark Williamson, once said: "*the church is to be a sane asylum, a place where people can retreat from the... madness and tell each other the truth.*"² We are joyful because we do have that kind of retreat from a world that is full of change, too often too much of it unwelcome change! At the same time, we also joyfully know that this community, this "sane asylum" is never a "retreat" simply for **us**; it is a retreat that exists for those who are, to use the old word, lost – those who live lives of quiet desperation, those who flit from one meal of spiritual junk food to the next not because they particularly like junk food, but because they are hungry for something that deeply satisfies, and they haven't found anything nourishing. These folks are lost,

²Clark Williamson, "Is the Church a Safe Place for Christians?", Encounter 54:1, Winter 1993, p. 39. Emphasis added.

because, again in the wise words of Barbara Blaisdell, they **have believed the lies that the culture tells us about what will make us happy** — more stuff, more goodies, more individualism. And we -- and they -- can indeed be joyfully transformed when we excitedly seek out such folks and then delightedly welcome them when they come.

You see, every person that God sends through our doors is indeed a miracle waiting to happen. And we will be transformed when we are glad and grateful and full of joy that God has chosen **us** as the vehicles by which to offer them hope and healing. For as former Disciples General Minister and President Dick Hamm says, *“We know about the transforming power of relationship with... Jesus Christ. [And] If we allow ourselves to become aware of the fact that many of those around us are experiencing a living hell, how can we not share what we know?”* How indeed, how indeed!

There is a story, perhaps apochryphal, of the seminary student taking his introduction to preaching class. The day came for him to preach his first sermon to the class, and he was terrified. Moving slowly and shakily into the pulpit, he looked at his notes for the longest time, and then finally raised his head and eyed his fellow students. And with a desperate, deer-in-the-headlights look, he finally said: *“Those of you who know what I should say, raise your hand.”* And of course, not a hand went up. To which he quickly and rather creatively responded, *“Well, if you don’t know, then I can’t tell you,”* and sat down. Now this was not exactly what the preaching professor had in mind but she was compassionate and offered him a second chance. So the second round came and again he climbed into the pulpit, no less shaky than the first time, again stood still for a very long time, and finally desperately blurted out yet again,

“Those of you who know what I should say, raise your hand.” Now this time, **all** the class members raised their hands. And our putative preacher was silent for a moment and then said, *“Well, if you already know, then I don’t have to tell you,”* and he sat down.

Well, the preaching professor, hoping that the third time might be a charm, slated him for one last try. Well, the appointed day came, and our student, still wearing the face of one who was about to undergo a root canal, came to the pulpit, stood silent for a moment and to the professor’s consternation again said: *“Those of you who know what I should say, raise your hand.* This time, half of the class raised their hands, and half of them did not. And our student preacher thought for a moment and then said, *“OK. Here’s the deal. Those of you who know tell the ones who don’t.”*

OK, my friends; here’s the deal:

- Those of you who know what is like to have been lost but then to have been joyfully found by a community that cares, tell those who don’t.
- Those of you who know the power of a congregation of Christians caught up in Jesus Christ to make a passionate dent in the powers and principalities of racism and of homophobia and of sexism and poverty, tell those who don’t.
- Those of you who know the utter peace and assurance and hope of a life lived in Jesus Christ, tell those who don’t.

And, then, then, we **will** go out in joy. And we will be not just changed, but transformed. Shall we go?