

Transformation
Sermon by
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There is an expression which people around here use quite regularly. On some occasions, this can be a very helpful set of words. But its common use as if it were divinely given wisdom drives me absolutely crazy. Our staff gets a kick out of someone coming into the office and innocently using the expression, and then sitting back to watch as my face goes into all kinds of distorted convulsions. The expression is phrased this way: It is what it is. Like I said, in some cases this can be a very helpful set of words. It's a way of saying: This is the way the situation is, so don't try to fight it, just accept it for what it is and move on. It can be helpful for accepting a reality which may be cruel but must be faced. But that's not always the way these words come out, and I'm not the only one who has an objection to them. In a recent article in the newspaper an English professor at a college somewhere listed this expression one of his most hated sayings. His objection to it was because it is "phonetically redundant." My complaint is that it is a cop-out. It's an easy way to casually dismiss the concerns of someone else, a way of saying, "So what if you are being treated unjustly, so what if something turned out badly. It is what it is." In other words, "Shut up and deal with it." On this particular Sunday this expression has an especially onerous ring. It says that being made new is not possible, you can't change, you can't improve yourself or your situation. After all, 'it is what it is.' I guess that's what gets me when I hear that expression used – that sense of hopelessness, and that we just have to accept something that is less than fair. Ten years ago, when you all were preparing for a new pastor, you engaged in a long process to discern God's mission for you. That work resulted in a finely worded document, part of which appears in your bulletin every week. There is a key word to this statement, and that key word is: Transformation. That means it doesn't have to be the way it is; we don't have to be the way we are. Things and - more importantly – people can change, can work for what is best, for what is right, for what is just. Some time ago I read where Bishop Desmond Tutu, who labored long and hard against the evils of apartheid in South Africa, was asked if there was a gospel to give to someone outside of the church. He thought a while and then said there was gospel for nonbelievers, that went along the lines of: "It doesn't have to always be this way." I like that a lot better than "It is what it is." Bishop Tutu lifted up the Christian belief that repentance is possible, that transformation can happen, that we can be different people; that we don't always have to be stuck in the same old ruts we find ourselves. If that is a gospel for those outside of the church, it is even more so the gospel for those inside the church. Every year on the Sunday after January 6th – the day of Epiphany – we celebrate Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Over the last few years we do that in this place by having a service where we renew our baptismal vows as a congregation. During this service we hear pretty much the same words that are offered when we celebrate a baptism for someone. But on this Sunday those words are not directed at someone else (if they ever are, which they are not). They are directed at us. We start off a new year by remembering that in our baptisms God has called and claimed us by name, for ministry – not dismissive indifference in the name of "It is what it is." As we do this we read from the Gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus. They all have their own take on this event, and it's interesting to note how each of the Synoptic Gospel writers – i.e., Matthew, Mark and Luke – viewed this event. For Mark, there is one image here that is not found anywhere else. As Jesus comes out of the water, he sees the skies split open; the heavens are torn apart because God has come to dwell with humanity in Jesus Christ. This is the ultimate in transformation – heaven itself is changed so that God will be with us. New life is not only possible, it is a divinely given expectation. As we come to this service, we know how much we need transformation. We need it as a church, to receive new life so that we can proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in such a way that people will hear it, experience it, feel it, taste it, and want to be a part of it. But we also need it as individuals. Some of us

have had a really tough year, and we want to experience transformation in the new year. We want to know not that "It is what it is," but that God is working in our lives so that what is can be changed, so that we can be made new. For some of us, that means a new job; for others, a job, period. For others it means a new vision of what is possible. For others it means new jolts of excitement and wonder for our relationships. It looks like many different things to many different people, this transformation. One dramatic way of seeing this came my way last week in an article a friend sent me. It was written by a missional church pastor who was reflecting on transformation as he saw it played out in a high school football game. This was a game played in Texas, where football is practically a religion. We all know how rooting for our children to win in sports can be a very powerful force, overwhelming almost everything else. But this game was different. One team had lost just a couple of times, while the other one hadn't won a game all year. In fact they had only scored two touchdowns the whole year. But that's not what made this game unique. What made it special was that when the winless team showed up they had armed guards watching every step they took. You see, the winless team wasn't a high school. It was made up of teen-aged members of a maximum security correctional facility. They were kids who were serving multi-year sentences, kids who had never been cheered for in any of their games. So the coach of the home school had an idea. He sent out e-mails to his players and parents of the school and asked them to root against their own team, to cheer for the kids from the facility. He had a message he wanted them to send to the players on the other team – that they were just as important as anyone else on earth. The kids from the facility were so amazed that people were rooting for them by name. They had never experienced anything like this before. People usually avoided them at all costs. Now here were people rooting for them. As a result, they matched their previous touchdown total for the whole year, even though they still lost the game. After the game the two sides gathered at midfield for a prayer. One of the facility's kids lifted up a tear-filled prayer of thanksgiving: "Lord, I don't know how this happened, so I don't know how to say thank You, but I never would've known there was so many people in the world that cared about us." What happened to both of those teams, the one that won the game and the one that lost but won some self-respect? Transformation. One side wasn't going to be held captive by the god of winning at all costs. They were serving another God, who seeks good in everyone. The other side felt that love, and time will tell if transformation will come in other ways for them. Granted, transformation for you may not be that dramatic. But the possibility is always there, because the possibility is held by God, not us. That's the meaning behind baptism. It is God coming to us, working in us, working through us. Gifting us with transformation, making us new. As you renew your baptismal vows this morning, remember that no matter what the headlines say, no matter if you have a job or you're looking again, no matter if you feel good about yourself or you feel like no one cares, that transformation is always possible. God is always at work in you and around you, working to make you into that creation for which you were intended. We don't have to be the way we've always been. We can be made different. For we have been touched by the waters of grace.

Amen.