

Continuing the Journey along the Good News Road

An invitation to Transformation

Introduction

Welcome to this journey through scripture on the road to transformation. As you meet God in and through the words and experiences of others may you also experience transformation in your own life and see it affecting the life of your congregation

Years ago I sat in on a New Testament class at a seminary in California. The one thing which drew my attention was the professor's comment, "*scripture contains its own future.*" Since then I've thought about that many times and realize the best stories are those in which I learn something about God, about myself or others, and the world in which I live. The stories are about the past. They are also about the present and draw us into the future I've also noticed that different passages speak to me and others at different times. A Chinese American pastor I knew, said when he was young he began to read the ***Psalms***. It was easy to read the praise psalms, but he didn't really understand the laments or the ones about enemies. After he had lived a little longer and experienced some of life's painful things and developed a few enemies, the other Psalms also began to speak to his heart and he could understand wanting God to intervene and even punish some people.

Throughout the scriptures transformation happens over and over again – God spoke, and the creation emerged from the chaos of nothing. Moses, outside of his awareness, had been preparing his whole life for the task of leading the Hebrew people out of Egypt. When he encountered God in a burning bush in the wilderness, he was able to respond because he had the tools he needed. The long wandering journey of the Hebrew people in the wilderness seems to have been a necessary part of their being shaped as the people of God. Even after they were in the Promised Land, their story is one of repeated unfaithfulness and the prophets calling them back. When the temple was destroyed and the Hebrews were sent into Exile, they learned that God was not just a local deity, but God of all and was to be found everywhere. The story of Saul on the road to Damascus is a dramatic story of transformation. Peter on the other hand experienced a gradual transformation as he lived with Jesus.

The scriptures you will encounter in these pages are just a few of those I might have chosen. I suspect many of them will be familiar. However, sometimes the things which are most familiar hold the greatest gifts for us. The chances are you will hear and see things you hadn't seen before. I hope even in those which are most familiar you will find gifts which will speak to you and encourage you as you continue the journey.

Getting Started

Sometimes people and congregations seem to wander into transforming experiences in ways that seem almost accidental. Most often transformation follows a recognition on the part of some of the leaders and hopefully the pastor or pastors that we are living in a new day and yet as church we are often trying to live in the same old way. In more than one congregation I've encountered, *people seem to be backing into the future, looking forward to the past*. There is much we can learn from the past, but we cannot go back to it. God is always out ahead of us and calling us into a new day.

Your congregation may be one of many Disciples congregations which are in decline. Occasionally new programs are tried, but mostly they don't seem to create much and after an initial blip we go back to business as usual. Sometimes church meetings don't seem to be much different than the meetings of other organizations to which we belong and we begin to show up out of a sense of "*ought*." We may notice that fewer and fewer young people are willing to be there just because *we think they ought to be*. Sometimes we recognize in ourselves and others that something is lacking. Surely God has something more in store for us.

The 20/20 Vision that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) accepted in 1999 listed four imperatives – To be an anti-racist church, to establish 1,000 new churches, the transformation of 1,000 existing churches and training of 1,000 leaders. All of those are both challenging and commendable. Transformation and leadership seem to go together. If transformation is going to happen, we need leaders. If we are to see a new generation of leaders emerge, we need transformation. Transformation – meaning to be transformed – is at the very least, challenging. It is hard to define and seems to be easier to recognize after it happens than to know just what it will look like when we begin.

Those of us who have worked with it for a while, have learned a few things:

- 1) There are no experts in the area of transformation.** Some things which produce amazing results in one setting seem to be totally ineffective in another. The transformation journey requires people who are willing to be learners, help others learn, try new things and adapt resources to fit the needs. We can't call someone in from the outside and expect them to give us a program or fix our churches for us.
- 2) Transformation is a process not a program.** In reality no program can promise and deliver certain results, but there are many tools and resources to help us on the journey. The process develops as we continue our journey.
- 3) Transformation isn't a quick fix.** Most of us would like to think a few minor changes will lead easily and quickly to transformation. Alan Roxburgh, among others, points to the fact that our world, our culture, even our local neighborhoods and churches are living in a time of major upheaval and transformation. *So, no matter what, our journey is just beginning*. Perhaps that is one of the reasons the story of the Exodus offers a metaphor for the journey we are just beginning. To

that, many reply, “*We don’t have time for such a long journey. Remember during the years in the wilderness, the Hebrew people grew both in numbers and their relationship to God.*”

- 4) Transformation begins with a changing heart.** We understand transformation is a gift from God. We can’t make it happen any more than we can make plants grow. We do have a part. The rest comes from God. One of the first steps seems to be a return to the study of scripture and developing practices of prayer and meditation.
- 5) Courage, Clarity, and Commitment** are essential to this journey. 1) Courage – it isn’t easy to step off familiar paths and go in a new direction, especially when success is not assured. 2) Clarity – this takes a willingness to listen, explore, test, and focus on the work to which God is calling us. 3) Commitment – We will not know for some time, probably years, whether or not transformation is really occurring. There are some markers we can use along the way. At the same time we have to work and hope and trust that the fruit will come and God who acted in the past and acts in the present, will continue to act in the future. Staying the course requires an abundance of these three qualities.

Make a Decision

Your congregation may have already made a commitment to transformation and begun a process which will lead to a new and vital future. For you a decision about using a small group Bible study may be easy to make and put in place. You may already be using a study and will be looking for the next one.

However, if that isn’t where you are and you have concluded you and your church are in need of transformation, and you are willing to make a commitment to the study of scripture as well as deepening your relationship to God, then you are ready for the next decisions about where and how to begin. You may have a committee or task group you can turn to or you may need to step forward and volunteer to help make this happen.

If you’re a pastor, one option may be to invite a group of people to covenant together to enter into a process of study and prayer. You may want to start with the elders. If they aren’t in the habit of meeting, this is an opportunity to begin to change that pattern. *(Changing old patterns is part of the transformation process.) There are places where change can be made pretty easily and yet the impact is far reaching. One of my favorite teachers call these “soft spots.” Bible study is usually one of those “soft spots.”*

If there is no group assigned to work with transformation or encourage small groups, you might suggest to the board chair that a transformation task group be appointed. This could be an informal group which will bring a plan to the board. Once you’ve decided to have a group, look for a facilitator or facilitators. And then begin to recruit people to become a part of a small group. If you are familiar with the study

Developing Deeper Discipleship, from Disciples Home Missions, Cathy Myers Wirt provides excellent guidelines for recruiting people for this kind of study. If you don't have that resource some simple guidelines are:

- 1) Find a partner or two who will pray, plan, and work with you to begin a small group. Two or three people working together on a project is always much stronger than one person working alone.
- 2) Make a list of potential small group members and begin praying for them, about their participation in this study, then contacting them.
- 3) A personal invitation usually goes much further than an open invitation.
- 4) Also announce it at church in case there is someone whose interest you may not know about.
- 5) Find places you can talk about starting a small group and invite people who are interested to meet together to plan next steps.
- 6) Pray and continue to pray.

Participants

This Bible study is designed for both groups and individuals. Each person who participates is also invited to spend time in individual study. The design of the study material is simple and what happens out of it will depend on you.

- 1) You'll need a Bible or if you don't like marking in your own Bible, there are numerous online sites that you can go to, ask for a particular translation, copy it and then you may mark it up as much as you like. There are copies of the text included with each of the studies.

If you want to download these or other passages from the internet biblegateway.com, oremus bible browser, and the Jewish Virtual Library for the Tanakh will be helpful to you.

- 2) Sometimes I suggest you use a particular translation of a passage or look at the passage in different translations. One of the challenges with all of our translations is that there is rarely only one way to translate important words and often there are no exact equivalents. By looking at more than one translation you may get a better understanding of the passage or another perspective.
- 3) At the beginning of each session an outline of the session along with the study materials is provided. Next are copies of the scripture passages. Then there is a section entitled, "*Behind the Text*". That section contains a little information about what was going on at the time, the perspective of the writer or writers, and other material which I hope you will find both interesting and useful. In each session you are invited to read the passage as a beginning point for exploring it. You may read it before or after the text, whichever you prefer. This is followed by a section, "*Observations and Consider*". This section is by no means complete. You are invited to make your own observations and reflect on things which occur to you in the reading.

At the end of each section is a suggestion for an activity for a small group to do. Whether you use those or not is optional and will depend in part on the amount of time you have for each session. Please, do not feel limited to these suggestions. As you are studying a particular passage, you may think of another activity which will suit your group better. Because of the nature of the study, I have had to rely heavily on the written word and what can be included simply. That may suit your group just fine. However, I'm aware that when possible if something can engage all of our senses, the learning is better.

- 4) "*Practicing the Presence*". During the weeks of this Bible study you are also invited to begin to begin or add to your prayer practices and deepen your relationship with God. The suggestions offered are just that. These do not come as a prescription. Over the years I have often found myself and others standing with Jesus' disciples when they said, "*teach us to pray.*" I have had the privilege of knowing many people who are now listed in our Disciples history books. If I have learned anything from each of them, it has been the importance of building

a relationship with God, prayer, spiritual practices, and the study of scripture.

Mae Yoho Ward was one of those persons who by her living helped shape my own life of prayer. After she died, her son, published a small book of prayers, ***The Seeking Heart***. She had the practice for many years of keeping a prayer journal, a practice I've admired, but not always used. The prayers from her last years were in the form of letters to God. In the very last entry she wrote, "*Dear God, Here I am, Mae Ward. I'm still on a pilgrimage. I'm still in kindergarten, trying to handle the blocks of life and string the beads of prayer.*" I see in that prayer a reminder that our relationship is one we develop over a lifetime.

Besides what I have learned from men and women I've most admired, I've learned some other things along the way from a great variety of people which have opened doors for me and helped me realize that there is no one way to pray or one ideal prayer pattern or practice. For the part each of those persons has played in my life I am very grateful. Among the things I've learned are:

- ▶ Each of us is invited into a unique relationship and experience of God.
- ▶ Since no two of us are alike, our experiences of God are as different as we are.
- ▶ Some people are content with following the same prayer practices each day at a particular time and place.
- ▶ Others of us quickly become bored and restless and the answer isn't to do more of the same, more regularly.
- ▶ I don't relate to the people in my family the same way every day, so why should I relate to God exactly the same way all the time?
- ▶ Some people are morning people and others aren't. There is no particular value in getting up before dawn to pray. God hears us just as well anytime and some of us may hear God better at other times.
- ▶ Some people are night owls and are more awake and alert at night.
- ▶ Some people can go away to a quiet place. While that has usually been the interpretation of what one ought to do, I learned in an Indian church, people aren't always quiet and worship and prayer happen anyway.
- ▶ I like the translation which says "*Go into your heart room.*" That we can have with us anywhere and even the car can become a place of quiet for prayer and reflection --- as long as you pay attention to your driving.
- ▶ One of my favorite forms of prayer is one I often use in the morning as I am waking. Flora Slosson Wuellner calls it the "basking prayer." It is simply being open to the light and presence of God, no conversation, just being. This is prayer for anytime or any place, but is especially good when you simply need to "be".

Adapt the following suggestions to fit you. During the weeks of this study you are invited to first of all explore the prayer practice which some have called praying with scriptures and which Alan Roxburgh describes as "dwelling in the Word." Because many of us have a tendency to slide into the habit of coming to prayer with our laundry list of things we want God to do, this particular form of prayer invites us to listen and hear where God may be leading us.

The process for reading and listening for God through the scripture is a simple one and one which may form a part of your prayer practice during the course of this study. A few suggestions for approaching these studies are:

- ▶ Pick a time and place – not necessarily at the same time each day unless that fits both your temperament and your schedule.
- ▶ Morning people may want to read as part of their morning routine.
- ▶ Night people may want to include this in the evening routine.
- ▶ Commuter people may want to use a talking version and listen on the road. There are no rules about how you do this. Choose what fits you best.
- ▶ Set a time limit. If you really only have 5 or 10 minutes for this reading, that will be enough time to read through the passage. Do yourself a favor and don't get hung up in thinking you *ought* to spend more time. Do what fits!
- ▶ You may already have a regular pattern of spiritual practice. Many people have gotten hung up on someone else's practice. During the weeks of this study you will be invited to primarily use one simple practice, but the focus will change depending on the scripture being used.

Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1st Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2nd Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – “evening and morning.” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3rd During the week read “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” on the text. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

To the Guides – (Leaders)

Since you are going on a journey “Guide” seemed to fit better than leader and may be less stressful, particularly for those of you who haven’t had lots of experience in leading or teaching Bible studies. Even if the idea of being a guide is new for you, if it is something you feel called to, you’ll have what you need. You don’t have to have all the gifts needed by a leader or guide. You do have to be willing to do on the job training and invite people in the group to use their gifts so that the group can become a community where people learn together. In any transformation journey everyone is both learner and teacher.

Remember the #1 Rule – There are no experts! Your most important job will be to guide the conversation. You’re not there to be the authority or the answer person. When you don’t know something, say so. If someone asks a question that no one has an answer for, there are several good ways to go. *“I don’t know”* or *“I’ll look into it”* or better yet, *“Would one of you like to look into that for us and tell us next time what you learn?”*

Most of the background material is based on resources from the ***New Interpreter’s Bible*** until the last section. At that point I received a copy of ***The People’s Commentary***, by M. Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock. Some of the information is from lectures or things I have read over many years and no longer know just what the origin of the idea is. The background information is not extensive so if someone wants more information there are many very good commentaries including the ***New Interpreter’s Bible***, it’s predecessor, ***Interpreter’s Bible***, and ***The People’s Commentary***. There are of course dozens of other good commentaries including some which will focus on only one book.

If possible have a varied group in your Bible study. Persons of different ages and experiences often have much to offer each other. Encouraging people to listen to each other is an important part of your job. Pay attention. Is someone talking all the time? Are there some people who speak up so quickly, those who need time to think before they speak, never have a chance to say anything. Invite and encourage others to share in the leadership.

Prepare before each study. The Bible study is designed to encourage people to spend some time in reflecting on the scripture before the next gathering, so that when you come together, the text is at least somewhat familiar and people will have given it some thought. So doing your own preparation will be important.

Collect the materials you will need. This might include:

- ▶ Items for a worship center.
- ▶ A candle and lighter and any other special items for the week’s study.
- ▶ Make sure everyone has a copy of the study materials.
 - While you may give people the session sheets each week it is probably better to run them ahead of time and perhaps put them into notebooks.
- ▶ Copies of special materials such as prayers, music, poems.
- ▶ Any materials needed for activities.

- ▶ Video clips if those seem to fit a particular lesson.
- ▶ You may want to run copies of the scripture.

One week before the first session

The week before your first session, please be sure those who plan to participate in the studies have a copy of the resources, especially the “*Practicing the Presence*” material for the study, including the copies of the text. If there is an opportunity for a brief meeting of the group, you might plan a time to introduce the study and give them the material.

Make sure the space in which you meet is clean, comfortable, and welcoming.

If you are meeting in someone’s home this won’t be a problem. Sometimes when various groups share space, it isn’t always left ready for the next group. If the group chooses to have some kind of refreshments, encourage simplicity rather than elaborate spreads.

Help the group establish rituals.

Most of us think of Disciples as being “*ritual light*”. We generally are, but all of us have rituals which provide order, invite us in and help us connect to other people. The opening and closing worship times can help this as can the process you use in helping people build community, feel safe in talking with one another, and giving permission to look below the surface of the material being studied. If you are willing to share yourself, others will be more willing to share themselves.

If you want to involve others in the leadership, ask them ahead of time and give them time to be prepared.

For example, if you want different people to participate in leading worship each week, ask the week before and provide them with the material they will need. Encourage people in the group to use the gifts they have.

One more thing – Ideas for using this material for Sunday School

While the sessions are designed to be about 1 ½ hours long, you may find that doesn’t fit the needs of your group. You may decide instead you would like to use these in your Sunday School Class. If you do, there are a few simple changes:

- 1) Instead of having 7 sessions, go to 8 sessions. Make the first session one of introduction and provide people with the material for the seven sessions so that they can do the reading and prayer practice in the week before the meeting.
- 2) Instead of the worship which is included, shorten that time to an opening prayer, perhaps the hymn, if you group likes to sing, and lighting the candle. At the end, close with a brief circle of prayer and invite people to hold one another in prayer through the coming week.
- 3) Keep the community building time to a minimum. It isn’t that this isn’t important, but if this is a class that already has connections with one another, a brief check-

in will be enough. You may also want to plan an extra activity at some other time which brings the group together.

- 4) Read the scripture only once. If it is a longer passage, you may want to read only a particular portion or even ask people to lift up the portions that drew their attention during the week they have been preparing for this Sunday.
- 5) Instead of focusing on all of the material, choose the items which stood out for you or for the group or particular needs of your congregation.

Finally

In using this material there are no hard or fast rules. Whenever I write something I realize words on a page are only half of the process. The other half lies with those who use the material. It will really only come to life when it is used.

One of the other things I have learned about transformation is it takes time. I once had a pastor come to me and tell me she wanted to become a better pastor. As we talked about that I discovered what she really wanted was for me to make her a better pastor. She wasn't really wanting to do any of the work. I am sure you know the outcome. Each of us has to be responsible for changing. If our churches are to be in the process of transforming, we also have to be in the process of transforming. That means doing some things differently, including deepening our relationship to God in prayer and study as well in our behaviors. Transformation affects every part of our lives.

While this study has been modeled in part on **Developing Deeper Discipleship**, one of the best bible studies I think Disciples have ever had, there is one component you will find I have included only in passing, "Suggestions for Outreach Activities." This isn't because I don't think they are important. I think they are extremely important. I also think Mother Teresa gave very sound advice when she said the best place to begin is to do something good where we are with people close at hand. As you see needs around you, look for ways you can begin to reach out to others.

One of the major changes which began years ago, but is expanding in this 21st century is the definition of our neighbor. Our neighbors may live next door, down the street, or on the other side of the world. So as you look around and see need, you may want to encourage the people of your group to get involved in a project.

Morton Kelsey, an Episcopal priest and teacher at San Francisco Theological Seminary introduced me to a deeper understanding of God and prayer. He also taught me a great deal about becoming aware that the little boxes we build around our view of the world or our perception of God doesn't confine either God or all that's going on outside of our awareness or the limits we try to keep in place. Morton used to say with some frequency as well as regularity, "If your love and understanding of God do not cause you to reach out in love to others, then you do not really love God. You love the idea of God – God's love is transforming and it will change you."