

Let us begin this morning with a little fiction. How many of you have ever read the comics, or seen the movies, including "The Hulk"? Like many of the Avengers, "The Hulk" is a human who can transform with supernatural powers into a superhero. As I have watched the story of "The Hulk" become what we know today, I have found the story of his transformation process to be fascinating. Hulk's human identity, Dr. Bruce Banner, has a significant battle within himself. He knows he can be Hulk, but he also knows what it takes to awaken the transformation. As Bruce, he can be normal, as normal as a brilliant scientist with a secret identity and superpowers can be. As Hulk, he is a force unlike any other to be reckoned with. The challenge in many of the scenes is that Hulk is destructive and scary to the public eye. Hulk is fueled by anger over the threat an evil force ensues and works to protect. Who is Dr. Bruce Banner? The behind the scenes encounters with Bruce reveal his real struggle to unleash his superpowers because it hurts to make the transformation and he isn't quite sure he likes who he becomes because of the destruction and rage. Other Avengers talk with Bruce and of course they all have their ideas for him. Fast forward to a scene of "The Hulk" at a diner eating breakfast. Bruce is now living fully in his transformation as Hulk and he has learned to accept the full potential of who he can be; a true superhero living among the public, sitting in a diner booth, eating a huge stack of pancakes, having kids recognize him and ask for his picture, feeling safe knowing "The Hulk" is with them.

I would like to suggest in some ways that the life story of Paul is a bit like Dr. Bruce Banner and "The Hulk". Most prominent is the reality of two lives merging together as one. We could consider that Paul's first life was one of normalcy with a job and social life and not much of a notice of others around him. But we can't ignore that we are also aware of another life Paul lives. The one in which he is a devoted apostle and teacher and witness to Jesus and Jesus' way; a supernatural life if you will. Sound like polar opposites? It was. So, what happened? A transformation. A conversion. A turn.

The account we just read in Acts reveals the key moment of transformation for Paul. Acts is a book best known as telling the history of the early church, how it was born and how it blossomed from the courageous and faithful teachings of the disciples' turned apostles as they traveled from city to city sharing the good news of Jesus and bearing witness to the love and light of God amid them. It is fitting, given the significant role Paul plays in his second life, that Acts would share of Paul's transformation. The underlying takeaway is that Paul serves as an example for all as to the necessary turn (transformation) that must take place in all our lives. Paul puts it this way, **"for we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God"** (Romans 3:23) and therefore, we must confess and repent and receive God's forgiveness. Doing so in faith yields strength and courage and testimony beyond any imaginable possibility, opening the door for a new life with Christ as your stronghold.

Previous to his encounter with the Lord as accounted in Acts Paul had a life conformed to the standards of the sinful world. When Paul came face to face with the Lord his life was transformed. Was it easy? He actually writes of his battle, **“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”** (Romans 7:15) Paul would persevere in his battle. The temptations and struggles didn't simply disappear, but Paul learned to focus and transform his life in such a way that he could fully live into the potential God intended.

Paul's turn (transformation) was like a flashlight shining as a witness to the power of the Lord and it becomes a foundational message in all thirteen of his epistles to churches found in the New Testament. Paul's most prominent message proclaimed was the power of God to transform an old life into a new life through God's grace and faith in Jesus, the Christ. It was like Paul declared, “If God can help me transform the way God did then transformation is possible for you as well.”

Hear what Paul writes to the Romans, **“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world (or age), but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God- what is good and acceptable and perfect.”** (Romans 12:1-2) We must not conform our lives to the standards of the sinful world around us, as tempting as that may be (since “everyone is doing it”), but we are to **“be transformed by the renewing of our mind.”** That is, Christ has come to give us a new way of thinking- not to legalistically follow a fixed set of rules and regulations, but to desire to serve Jesus with all our heart and mind.

This renewal of the mind serves as a tool for us in our efforts to keep right relationship with God. Transforming our minds to be more aligned with God's wisdom and understanding in place of our own helps to influence us more truthfully. Transforming our minds to be more aligned with God's promises and power helps to assure us that we do not need to white knuckle or self-will our way to faithfulness. With our minds in the right places, our actions and emotions will be in tow.

And in Paul's letter to the Colossians, Paul references his conversion, turn, transformation moment, in which he entered into his new life with Christ. He poses to the Colossians an important question that I think is worth us pondering: **“If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits (forces) of the world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations?”** (Colossians 2:20)

Paul, as he does, goes on to explain. New life with Christ, a life transformed, includes the following characteristics and certainties of Christ. *Seeking things*

that are above, where Christ is. The things in us that are earthly are put to death: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed. Get rid of anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language. Do not lie to one another. Be clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another. Forgive. Be clothed with love. Let the peace of Christ rule your heart. Be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Teach and admonish one another. Sing psalms and hymns to God with gratitude in your heart. Build a Christian household (3:18-25). Devote yourself to prayer (4:2).

“Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (3:17).” (Colossians 3:1-17)

Sure thing, no problem, right? Amos 5:8 offers us that the Lord is the one who “turns deep darkness into the morning and darkens the day into night.” Psalm 114:8 offers us that the Lord is the one who “turned the rock into a spring (pool) of water.” Psalm 66:6 offers us that the Lord is the one who “turned the sea into dry land, so they could pass through the river on foot.” Psalm 78:44 offers us that the Lord is the one who “turned rivers into blood, so that the enemies could not drink of their streams.” A key element we are to remember today is that God has the power, and can and will use that power, to turn (transform) things from one reality to another. God is the creator and maker of the heavens and of the earth.

But what about humanity? The answer to this is a bit more complex. Does God have the power to turn (transform) humanity? Yes, but God doesn’t simply zap us into a new life. Transformation can take time and can have many layers of process. Transformation is often a battle of wills. Let us consider “free will” and whether God intervenes with humanity in their “free will” to choose God and God’s way.

The account of Adam and Eve in Genesis speaks to the “free will” given to them by God. The account tells of God gifting Adam and Eve the Garden of Eden along with their task to care for it as long as they refrained from eating the fruit from the one tree in the middle, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When it came time to decide whether to approach and partake of the fruit, the account does not share God sweeping in to remove them, or the snake for that matter, from the situation. Adam and Eve were given choice and in that moment they chose wrong. They chose to turn from God’s command and do their own thing and they would need to face the consequences because of it. How many times have we been in a similar situation?

With this understanding, we can ask the question again: Does God have the power to turn (transform) humanity? Yes. I think God does have the power, just like God has the power to turn (transform) things in creation, but God chooses with humanity to give us a part in the turning and transforming. This keeps us from becoming puppets in a play doing what the puppeteer controls. The power awakened in “free will” is the power of choosing God because God has chosen us and because God is the best choice.

God's greatest desire is to be in right relationship with us, God's most beloved creation. I don't believe anything makes God more joyful or makes the angels in heaven sing louder than when we, in our gift of free will, choose God and connect with God face to face in love and grace. The good news for us, more important than anything, is that God's grace is relevant to us all.

Why is that important? Because sin is also relevant to us all as humans. What is our greatest desire? Is it to be in right relationship with God? The bad and the ugly is the fact that, even though we may desire greatly to get it all right, we tend to turn away from God. In short, this is what is defined as sin: an act or thought against the will and way of God. For some it may be a single act done in repetition, like an addiction. For some it may be a bag of acts. For some it may be thoughts and elevated emotions, like revenge or anger or worry. For some it may be one really big mistake. For some it may be a lifetime of choices and deliberate intentions to do and get what is important to them regardless of the impact it may have on others, like Paul in the first part of his life.

Can transformation happen? Yes. Sin is not what defines us. As God's children, thankfully we are defined in God's love. Thus, when sin is so prevalent, we must turn and seek God's help in transforming. Can we acknowledge our sin, shortcomings, mistakes, turning away from God and choose to turn back to God in repentance for forgiveness? Do we have enough humility and courage to recognize our faults, and do we have enough confidence and faith in God's offering of grace and mercy, to turn back to God? Inspired by Paul's conversion story in Acts today, we might also ask ourselves whether we are willing to surrender ourselves to God, thus allowing God to wipe away (forgive) our old life (or elements of our old life that may be stealing from us and we don't even know it) and help us turn (be transformed) into a new (supernatural) life?

In an article, *Becoming More You: What it means to transform as a human*, "Our lives are about more than just behavior change, continuing education, or going to therapy, even though these can be aspects of — and contribute to — human transformation. Human transformation is an internal shift that brings us in alignment with our highest potential. It is at the heart of every major aspect of our lives. It affects how we see and relate to the world and how we understand our place in it.... Human transformation provides a clear path for each individual to live up to their full potential and to live their lives with greater purpose, clarity, and passion.... Human beings are innately wired for transformation. Perhaps our most extraordinary quality as a species is the ability to learn and adapt to nearly any situation." (Betterup.com, January 13, 2022) I will simply add with God's help!

We can. We are able. Transformation is possible. Let all God's people say. Amen.