

April 30th, 2017: Unfold: Claiming New Possibilities



This morning we pick up in our worship series utilizing the metaphor of the butterfly emerging from a cocoon, looking for connections with our own life journeys and faith development. Last week, we focused on the moment when the butterfly breaks out of the chrysalis and comes into the light. We talked about those things that hold us captive, bound within a cocoon of our own, afraid to break out and live freely into the people God made us to be.

Now that the butterfly has slipped free from the chrysalis, it's just beginning to unfold into its new form ---- you know that feeling when you've been crammed into seat on an airplane for a long flight? The first thing people do when they stand up is stretch... getting the blood flowing back to those places that might have had restricted flow... and they get all tingly with pins and needles. If you're sitting towards the back though... which I always seem to do, you can't fully stretch out yet... you'd hit your head on the overhead compartment, whack the person next to you, or smack your legs on the seat that's still directly behind you... But even though you're only partially stretched... it still feels amazing... and it's good to get blood circulating before you start walking anyway... wouldn't want to take a nose dive in the center aisle when your turn comes to exit the airplane!

The butterfly does the same sort of thing... after slipping free from the chrysalis, its wings are soft and malleable, its abdomen is distended, full of the fluid that belongs in the wings, and begins the process of pumping it out to the wingtips, which expands and stretches them out to their full potential. In just a short time, the wings are now fully expanded, but they are very soft and vulnerable. They're not yet ready to be used for flight... they're still adjusting to being out of the enclosure of the chrysalis. If the butterfly tried to spread them they would just bend downwards or flop over. The butterfly needs to hang down vertically so its wings can take shape and firm up, before it's ready for flight.

This space between the chrysalis and flying might seem like lost time... like nothing is going on. It's the space between two more "important" phases, metamorphosis and flight! But even though we can't see anything happening, the butterfly looks like it's just hanging out, waiting, or maybe unsure of what to do next... we almost want to be cheerleaders, going "Come on! You can do it!" But this space between is more important that we give it credit for... for butterflies and for us as well.

There's even a name for this space between things... LIMINAL SPACE, it deals with times of transition, with threshold moments, and boundaries. These in between times are often uncomfortable for us... We don't know how to be in between; it freaks us out, being between what WAS and what WILL BE. So often, we just want to get to where we're going... we want to get there, we want to be there. And then there's those seasons when we don't know "what's next", we almost flounder in the present, struggling with the now.

How many of you like major life transitions? Sure, we look forward to the new thing... or we dread it, but it is the space between that I'm referring to... the liminal space between one and the other. Like the transitional time that comes in between the shift from employment to retirement, from one job to another, from middle aged to elderly, from high school to college, from college into the "job market", from pregnancy to new birth, from healthy to sick, from engaged to married. In each of these major life transitions, we have NO CLUE what life looks like on the other side. Sure, we have hopes and dreams, but they're just that... we don't know. Sometimes we don't even know what to hope for or dream about.

We have a really hard time simply resting in this space --- and that's what the butterfly does as it comes out of the cocoon... it comes out and extends its wings, stretching them out, but it is not yet ready to fly. It must simply hang there until the wings have fully dried and are ready to be used. Interestingly, if a butterfly were to begin flying right away after it emerges from the cocoon, it would hurt its wings PERMANENTLY! Without allowing the wings time to dry in their full form, they would collapse in on themselves upon use... not having the strength and qualities needed for flight, they would bend and break, and then harden that way as they dry.

Most of us cannot stand liminal spaces, the times in between, when the only productive thing we can do is simply rest and just be, without a goal or a "purpose", without something we're intentionally working for or towards. Without stretching out our wings and taking flight... that time of just resting – giving the freshly formed wings time to dry – can feel useless... a waste of time... but oh boy, it is not! It's in that liminal space that imaginations are set free to dream of the future, that we can reflect on where we've been and how that's shaped us, and our skillsets are developed as we train and study, preparing for the future. In this time in between, we get to know ourselves a little bit more, our environment a little bit more, as we look within and around.

In our scripture today – and in fact, throughout the whole season between Easter and Pentecost when the resurrected Christ is hanging around, the disciples are in a liminal time, they are grieving Jesus' death and unsure of what to believe, since the women shared the news of the empty tomb, but as of yet in Luke's gospel, none of the men have seen the risen Lord, so they're not sure whether to believe "those silly women or not!" The two followers we find walking the road to Emmaus today need time to grieve, to figure it all out, time to decide what comes next... or at least their part in it.

They were so baffled by the past and the present that they had no conception of the future. Rather than simply stopping and finding comfort and meaning in this in between space, the two in our scripture get up and start walking to Emmaus, a neighboring town. They're headed out of Jerusalem, out of the city that killed their leader, maybe they're escaping for safety, or maybe they're running away from their grief and memories.

After his wife died, C.S. Lewis once wrote that he thought his grief might be less if he intentionally avoided the places he and his wife Joy had frequented by limiting his travels to only those places where they had never been together. So he switched grocery stores, tried different restaurants, walked only along streets and paths that he

and Joy had never taken. But it didn't work. To paraphrase Lewis, "I found out that grief is like the sky above—it is over everything."

The two travelers seem to think that by getting out of Dodge maybe they, too, could walk away from their grief, leave the bad memories of the previous Friday behind. Jerusalem was haunted with memories and the hopes they'd had as they'd followed Jesus into the city. Jerusalem was the place where their dreams had died. It was more than time to hit the road and see if they could leave their troubles behind.

And so rather than just resting in this liminal space, they leave, they start walking home and get intersected by none other than Jesus. But they are so stuck, they're so blinded by grief, that they can't even see that it's Jesus walking right alongside them. They can't see it until they stop to rest for the night... when they sit down for a meal and break bread together, THEN their eyes are opened. It is when they rest together that they can finally see that it's been Jesus there beside them all along.

You see, running away from the in between spaces, trying desperately to keep ourselves busy – it's a coping mechanism, not the solution. When we find ourselves in a liminal space – don't panic, don't go running to the next town trying to escape yourself and your memories, ask for God's peace, for the strength to stay present to the now, giving your wings time to set in this new space, reflecting on what's to come as you prepare yourself to fly.

Where are you right now? What liminal space do you find yourself in? What are the new possibilities that God is inviting you to dream about and, when you're ready, claim for yourself? Throughout the week, I invite you to be reflecting on these questions, to be present to the NOW, even in the midst of life's transitions and griefs, and to open your spirit for all that God has in store for you, not only in the future, but as each moment unfolds.