

May 14th, 2017: Emerge: Let Go - Leaving Behind What We Don't Need



Last Sunday, we took a week off our worship series to celebrate with our youth groups the amazing community they have developed and to hear from our high school seniors – but this week we return to the metaphor of the butterfly and its emergence from the cocoon and transition into flight. Since Easter Sunday, we’ve looked at how a butterfly, which started out as a creepy, crawly caterpillar, transforms in the dark enclosure of the cocoon, to emerge as a beautiful winged creature. We learned about the strength and persistence it takes to break out of the cocoon and the patience needed to rest during the in-between stages of life, those liminal spaces where, like the butterfly, our wings need to dry and become flight ready.

Now, stretching to the fullness of new potential, with wings at the ready, the butterfly begins to sense a calling to new heights. The sky beckons, and I imagine hunger demands that it leave its space of comfort, the place where transformation happened, the cocoon that still clings to the branch. But taking off, lifting into the air on its first flight means something profound—it can never go back into the cocoon. We’ll never know what crosses the mind of a butterfly in this moment, so all we can do is look to our own experiences to imagine what this moment is like. Full of fear, excitement, anticipation, and at the same time grief.

Let me tell you about Janet, a woman I met about five years ago in my previous church. When I first got to know her, she was timid and unsure of herself, she was obviously overwhelmed with life, and looked a little like a deer in headlights. Janet had just left her abusive husband, with her three kids in tow. With one elementary and two junior high school students to raise on her own, she had decided to stop drinking – and at our first introduction, she pulled me aside and said, “I’m a recovering alcoholic, I just left my husband, and I wanted to expose my kids (and myself) to a healthier environment, so I thought the church was a good place to start.” I reassured her that she was welcome and that our community would do our best to come around her and her kids with love and support. And we did just that, her kids were confirmed and they all began attending Christian education classes, not only on Sunday mornings, but on Wednesday nights too. Any programs we offered, they were there, soaking up the strength, hope and faith that is such a part of who we are as Christians. Over time, the timid-ness waned in Janet and day-by-day, she looked less afraid. She and I had many conversations over that first year – the year before I moved to Red Bank – she had struggled for so long to leave the unhealthy home life that she and her husband had created for her kids. She still wasn’t quite ready to file for divorce, but just the separation was a huge step for her... she had taken a step away from life that had imprisoned her and her children, and taken a chance with flight. Her wings were weak and she was just figuring out how to fly, but she had made the BIG leap of faith to leave the past behind and take to the skies. Over the past 5 years, I’ve kept in touch with Janet, and celebrated with her from afar as her divorce became final, leaving behind the abuse for good, as she has maintained her sobriety, quit smoking, stepped in to volunteer as a youth leader at the church, and grown in faith and spirit. She and her

kids no longer have a haunted look about them, but rather a joyful glow that shines from within. She just posted on Facebook the other day in awe of all she has accomplished over the years, "who is this woman? It may have been exhausting getting here but I sure am thrilled to finally be here!!! Never let anyone tell you you're stuck with who you are or that you don't have a choice. Anything is possible!!!"

In our metaphor, the butterfly has to let go of the past in order to fly... it leaves behind the cocoon, its last reminder of the transformation it underwent, from the caterpillar it once was, into this new form, full of new possibilities. Is there loss in that letting go, ABSOLUTELY! but there is so much to gain! In order to fully let go and embrace what change brings, we need to let go of the past, to accept change and adjust to life. As Louise Smith, one of the first woman to race in NASCAR, said, "You can't reach for anything new if your hands are full of yesterday's junk."

The trappings of the past, the familiar and oh so necessary cocoon, cannot go with the butterfly into its next stage of life... there is no way to carry that baggage around, even if it wanted to! We, on the other hand, are really good at holding onto the past, carrying our cocoons with us wherever we go... even if they weigh us down and hold us back. We all have lived through different stages of our lives that leave their mark, whether it's a failed relationship, failed business deal, bad decisions, situations, or something someone told us as a kid; those things that happened to us in the past that we hold on to today. Even when our past is full of good memories, of the good old days, that play like a movie reel in our minds. We watch them over and over, replaying only the best, cutting out the ugly and faded scenes. After time, this tends to distort our memories, not to mention blinding us from the new wonders and blessings unfolding before us in the present.

In the scripture that I read from Exodus, the Israelites who had left Egypt were aching for freedom. They had spent their lives as slaves of the Egyptians, work horses building up the infrastructure of the Empire and, as the story goes, Moses confronts the Pharaoh, and after devastation from one plague after another, he finally concedes to let the Israelite people go free. I would imagine these people as eternally grateful, thankful to God for seeing them through countless hard days, and thankful to the one who lead them into freedom. And yet when faced with the disorientation of all that was new and unfamiliar, faced with the challenges of finding a new home to settle in, of survival in the wilderness, many began crying to go back. Back into slavery, for at least there, they got to eat meat and bread. Remember what I said about selective memory? Wishing for enslavement simply to satisfy an empty belly... remembering the food, and not the hard work and mistreatment they narrowly escaped. The past is hard to let go of... even when it holds us back and limits our expectations for the future!

Letting go does not mean forgetting. These past memories, good or bad, are a part of who we are, but don't define us unless we allow them to. Our challenge is to think of "letting go" as a process of allowing ourselves to expand and grow beyond what we now are, to "rise up to meet" whatever is next. In doing so, we strive to honor and cherish, or overcome the past, be fully in the present, and look forward to the uncertain but exciting unfolding of the future. We can learn from the butterfly that "letting go" of the cocoon of what "was" is the only way to soar to new heights.

While we may have something tangible we need to let go of – like a toxic relationship, a job that is choking the life from us, or all the stuff we accumulate – we may also have less obvious things we should let go of too. Perhaps it’s a destructive emotion, like resentment. Or maybe it’s a detrimental way of thinking, like belittling ourselves or others, or expecting failure. Some of us are holding onto pride, anger, wrath, bitterness, from selfishness and it is weighing us down. If we are not careful it will choke us. What are some of the things holding us back? What are those things in our lives that we just need to LET GO of in order to spread our wings and take flight? Over this next week, I invite us all to reflect on what it is we need to LET GO of and to pray about just how to do that. And as we go to do this hard work of reflection and prayer, let’s keep Janet’s voice in our heads, “Never let anyone tell you you're stuck with who you are or that you don’t have a choice. Anything is possible!!!” Thanks be to God! Amen.