

20 September 2020

Exodus 1:8-22; Romans 12:1-8

Be Transformed by the New World

First Mennonite Church



Early Monday morning is often a time when I talk with my son on the phone. He lives in HKG, which is about 12 hours ahead. So, there are times we chat while I'm eating my breakfast and he's eating his supper.

Last Monday we talked about a wide range of topics including his most recent hike, the pros and cons of electric vs. hydrogen-fueled vehicles, the status of Covid-19 in HKG and Saskatoon, US-China relations, and how extreme political perspectives are fueling breakdowns and breakups between friends, family, and neighbours.

As we talked more on the topic of the politics of division, I at one point, marvelled at how two people can look at an issue, an event, or a thing and see something



completely different and respond in completely different ways. Let's take a simple example of a face covering. What do you see? One person will look at it and see it as a tool to reduce the spread of Covid-19. Another person, like these protestors in Regina and Saskatoon in summer, will look at the exact same face covering and see it as a sign of fear or another attempt by the government to take away our freedoms.

Here we are in the same province, breathing the same air, walking the same streets, **but living in two completely different worlds.**



Rest assured, I'm not going to talk about masks this morning, although I will return to it briefly at the end. I suspect most everyone is quite tired of how Covid this and Covid that dominates our conversations. I'm not going to talk about masks because this is my time to talk about the gospel. I'm using the **divisive conversation over face coverings as an example** of a much larger question, the real question: what is the truth? In what world is wearing a mask a good thing? In what world is it a bad thing? Who defines what is the world to which we are supposed to adjust, adapt, and conform?

We live in a world of divisive politics, lies and falsehood. But when we gather here in this church to sing, pray, listen, and ponder the words from the Bible, we are confronted by a profoundly different world than the one we live in during the week. Sometimes the world of the Bible will be comforting while at other times, not so much. That's the tension of confrontation, the experience of being caught in the crossfire of a debate over what is real.

"By the mercies of God... present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds" (Rom. 12:1-2).

"Present your bodies as a living sacrifice... do not be conformed to this [**unreal world in which we live**] but be transformed [**to the real world now that Christ has come**]."

There is our text. Right up front, let's be honest and admit that we are all gathered here in church on cusp of fall to engage in a debate over what's real and what's normal.

To be blunt, I make the assumption every week as I prepare my sermon that you come to church to be shaped, formed, moulded by the gospel so that during the week you are better equipped to act and speak and live as a disciple of Jesus. In



other words, you come to church each week to be **converted, changed, transformed** so that during the week you can present your body as a “sacrifice” to God. Like those hockey players during the Stanley Cup Playoffs offer up their bodies by falling down in front of slapshots from the blueline in order to protect their goal and goalie, so too, we disciples of Jesus, offer up

ourselves—body, soul, and mind—as a sacrifice to God during the week as an act of worship.

*Do not be conformed to this world but be **transformed**...* this word transformed...in Greek is, “metamorphoo” (μεταμορφώω). This is where we get our English word, “metamorphosis” from. It means to be changed, transformed from one thing into another.



A worm in a cocoon is mysteriously transformed into a beautiful butterfly. We say this is metamorphosis. The worm is transformed, becomes something completely different. A tadpole is mysteriously transformed, becoming

a frog. Sedimentary rock deep underneath the earth, is exposed to tremendous forces of heat, pressure, and chemical fluids over a long period of time is transformed into metamorphic rock.

I assume you come to church because you don't want to be conformed to this world, but you want to be transformed by the gospel. You want to grow in your faith. You want to be converted, moulded, shaped, changed more into Christ our Lord.

Of course, much of the rest of the world also wants to convert you to their reality, to their view of the world. Today, many people get their news and information not from the TV or newspapers, but from social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. While there is some great and useful information on these

platforms, there is a great deal of misinformation, half-truths, and outright lies, too. Take for example, this Facebook post back in 2016: *Sweden has discontinued the tradition of adorning street poles with Christmas lights to avoid angering Muslim refugees.*¹

This created a huge uproar and anti-Muslim backlash. Let me be clear. This headline **WAS NOT** true. What did happen was the Swedish Transport Administration issued a press release saying it would no longer allow local municipalities to hang Christmas lights on public utility poles, citing two reasons: first, the law didn't authorize the agency to share its electricity, and second, the poles weren't designed to bear extra weight, so all the extra Christmas decorations were a safety hazard.

Someone or some group twisted the original story and turned it into an anti-Muslim headline, no doubt to sow fear and anger against Muslims. And because these online platforms made sharing information so quick and easy, this false story spread like wild-fire.

There are some Christians who have been fooled by online conspiracy theories which falsely say there's no virus pandemic, but that it's the government's attempt to "shut down churches."²

While we live in this wonderful and beautiful world, there is a dark-side, too. All of us have got to find a way to navigate and live in it. We've got to learn to discern truth from half-truths and lies.

In our Exodus reading, Pharaoh tried to commit genocide against the Hebrew slaves, but the two mid-wives hadn't conformed to Pharaoh's view of the world, Pharaoh's reality. As a result, the two young women, Shiphrah and Puah, carried out an act of civil disobedience by refusing to kill the Hebrew baby boys.

By coming to worship you expose yourself to an upside-down view of the world, to a divine and subversive power, simply because it is true while other powers are not. We are talking, of course, about God. God has flipped the world on its head in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Something profound, decisive, earth-shifting has been worked by God in the cosmos through the resurrection of Jesus.

¹ <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/sweden-bans-christmas-lights/>

² <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/There-is-no-pandemic-Mythbusting-John-MacArthur-s-claims>

Paul announces that a powerless young Jew turned what is and what is not real on its head. Before the self-serving spirits of this world, Jesus countered, “If you would find your life, you must first lose it.” “Seek first the Kingdom of God and then all things will be added.” “Forgive others.” “Love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!”

And then he proceeded to go about in such a unconventional way—healing those who were ill, telling the truth, feeding the hungry, confronting and loving his enemies, raising the dead, caring for the poor and weak—that the powers of this world simply had to put him to death.

For a time, it seemed as if the spirits of this world had won, namely, that death had triumphed. Jesus was dead and buried. And yet, among his paralyzed followers who were sitting in fear behind locked doors, he returned in power, having battled the principalities and powers, and defeated them once and for all. A new world was dawning, arising in the middle of the old. His once disheartened, fearful band of disciples exploded forth into the whole world saying, “It’s a whole new world! Wake up! God wins!”

This is the reality, the power we have access to, the power Paul says we are to be conformed to, the power that we are to allow to transform us. This is the world God calls you and I to live in.

The problem is there are some who think that this new world is only as big as one’s heart or soul. “My soul is saved”, they say. Now I’m ready to go to heaven, leave behind this sorry and broken world. Then there are adults who think that since they are already grown and mature, there’s no more growing or maturing to do. No. Being transformed is a life-long process of change and spiritual growth. It takes a lifetime to fathom Jesus; it takes a lifetime to appropriate Jesus; it takes a lifetime to learn to be more like Jesus.

I asked the worship leader to read up to Romans 12:8. Had I asked her to read on, she would have read a long list of spiritual disciplines Paul encouraged the church in Rome to practice and live out. Listen to some of the list of Christian disciplines. “Love one another...serve the Lord...be patient in suffering...contribute to the needs of the saints...extend hospitality to strangers...bless those who persecute you...do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good,” just to name a few.

At first glance, these spiritual disciplines sound quaint and benign as we've heard them again and again. But, let me remind you how odd they sound to those outside the church—and sometimes to those inside the church, too.

In 18th century US it was assumed that having black slaves was normal. John Woolman, a Quaker, came to believe that everyone was created in the image of God, and it wasn't right for anyone, especially a Quaker, to own slaves. And he made it his goal to get rid of slavery within the Quaker community.

When Woolman raised the issue, everyone thought he was, to use the colourful phrase from Ontario Premier, Doug Ford, a few fries short of a Happy Meal. But Woolman persisted, travelling up and down the US East coast by foot or horseback for over 30 years, visiting Quaker slave owners with the gentle, yet firm message that enslaving people who God created in God's image wasn't right. The Quakers were the first religious group in the US to formally denounce and forbid slavery among its members.

Being transformed by the gospel is a life-long journey of following Jesus, of putting into practice the teachings of Jesus.

Many years ago, when my spouse I witnessed a fight between three people—two on one side and one on the other—on a fairly busy street. My spouse urged me to do something as no one else was getting involved, so I ran over and tried to get myself in the middle. Thankfully, this wasn't a gang fight and I didn't encounter any weapons. My presence helped to stop the punching and kicking, and they just started yelling at each other. Soon others came and the fight ended. As we left a woman came up to us and asked why we did what we did. We said we are Christians. Jesus calls us to peace not violence. The woman looked at us as if we were from another planet.

When someone obeys Christ and forgives an enemy or loves the poor or speaks up for the voiceless, **are they** going against what's real or showing the world what things look like when someone conforms to the new reality offered in Christ?

I'll admit that I wear a mask when I go into a store or into a place where I know I can't keep a 2m distance. I do it **not** because the government tells me to do it, although I agree with our chief medical health officer, Dr. Saqib Shahab, when he says wearing a mask is a "simple thing to do. You put it on when you're indoors in

a public place. Afterwards, you take it off. It's a simple act. Our health-care providers (and) people who work in grocery stores have been doing this without complaining for the last seven months."³

That's one good way to look at it. In what world is wearing a mask a good thing? I choose to wear a mask because of my faith. As a Christian I'm part of a much larger community. I wear a mask to protect myself from others who may have Covid-19. I also wear a mask to protect others from me, just in case, I have Covid but am asymptomatic, that is, don't have any obvious symptoms. Sure, it's sometimes uncomfortable. It felt very strange wearing it when I went into the bank sometime ago! Yes, my glasses sometimes fog up, but I do it because **Jesus invites me to live not just for myself, but for others**. Part of loving my neighbour during this pandemic is looking out for the safety and health of the community of which I'm a part. A simple way of doing that is to don a mask.

Paul urges us to be more than just good and nice. Paul reminds us of the new world that has dawned with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and urges us to be transformed to this new reality, living into the world as it is and will be. By following Jesus, we are transformed so that we can live our lives for others as a sacrifice to God. Amen

³ <https://www.cjme.com/2020/09/14/saskatchewan-top-doctor-reacts-to-anti-mask-protests/>