



## TRANSMOGRIFICATION IMAGINATION

April 8, 2018, Second Sunday of Easter

Psalm 114

Douglas T. King, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

---

I have always loved the newspaper comic “Calvin and Hobbes” by Bill Watterson. For those of you unfamiliar with it, it tells the story of a remarkably precocious, spiky-haired six-year-old boy named Calvin and his sidekick, a very large stuffed tiger named Hobbes. Calvin is consistently engaged in mayhem, some of it real and some of it the product of his prodigious imagination.

In one series of cartoons Calvin invents a Transmogrifier. As Calvin and Hobbes stand next to a large box with the word “transmogrifier” scrawled on the side, Calvin announces, “You step into this chamber, set the appropriate dials, and it turns you into whatever you’d like to be.” Hobbes responds, “It’s amazing what they do with corrugated cardboard these days.” Calvin replies, “Isn’t it?” In another strip, Calvin, noting the categories listed on the side, explains the science of it. “All you do is set the indicator and the machine automatically restructures your chemical configuration. You can be an eel, a baboon, a giant bug or a dinosaur.” Hobbes asks, “What if you want to be something else?” Calvin answers, “I left some room. Just write it on the side.”

Ah, the imagination of youth. But of course the fantastical proposition of what that cardboard box can do is speaking to an underlying hunger that appears to be endemic to the human condition. We have a fascination with radical transformation, the idea of one thing changing into another. In the Middle Ages people were fascinated with alchemy, the attempt to turn lead into gold. Any decent magician will enthrall us with some sleight of hand that appears to turn a deck of cards into a live dove. And we are even more fascinated by how we may be radically transformed; from the terrifying type of Dr. Jekyll becoming Mr. Hyde



to the amazing type of the kissing of a frog who then becomes a prince; or mild-mannered Clark Kent tearing out of his suit to become Superman. And a gazillion self-help books have made vast promises of transforming who we are in six easy steps. On the shallow end of this equation we desire to be transformed into someone younger, thinner, or more capable of negotiating billion dollar deals. But there is a deeper level to all of this as well. No matter how young and thin and rich we are; no matter how perfect and shiny we may appear on the outside; all of us have this place inside of us that is not quite complete. When life is hard that place may shout inside of us about just how screwed up we are. When life is good it may be no more than the subtlest whisper hinting that something is missing; or reminding us of some hurt from our past that never quite heals; or a nagging loneliness; or a persistent questioning of purpose. The author John Updike calls this space within us that he believes only God can address as, “a pocket in human nature that nothing else will fill.” \*

If we stop and look deep within ourselves, there is some part of us that needs to be completed; some way in which we would like to be transformed. But transformation is hard. We wish it were as easy as the magical elixir in some bottle, or the kiss of a princess, or six steps laid out in a book. But it never is.

Another thing that is hard is Easter after Easter Sunday. On Easter Sunday we can whip up some enthusiasm for the resurrection. We can dare to believe that perhaps indeed it all may be true. Maybe the ultimate transformation is possible. Maybe Jesus did rise from the dead. And maybe that promise is good for us as well. Maybe God’s love is more powerful than all that has ever or will ever ail us; more powerful than whatever feels missing or bent or slightly askew within us; more powerful than all of our fears, failures and frustrations combined.

With brass instruments filling the chancel, joining with the choir and the organ to belt out all of those major chords of victory, we can leave behind our doubts for a moment and be Easter people. We can be Easter people who believe that God’s love is more powerful than death and that love is for all of us.



Easter people are not perfect. They are not without their foibles and missteps and lurking concerns. But Easter people trust that the promise of resurrection is real and is for them. And Easter people know that if you put that resurrection promise on one side of a balancing scale and everything that is less than perfect in their lives and in themselves on the other side, the weight of the resurrection promise side would thunk down with such authority that the imperfections on the other side of the scale would be flipped out of the room.

But that was a week ago. The brass has left the sanctuary, the Hoyt brothers with their trumpet and trombone are nowhere to be found. Our liturgical calendar tells us we are still in the season of Easter, week two of seven weeks' worth. But it is a little harder to believe it all today. We have spent another week of living in the midst of what is imperfect and missing in our lives. We can see plenty of evidence of the reality of all of that. Resurrection reality in our midst is a little harder to spot. The promise seems a little more elusive. And the scent of the lilies has faded.

If we are going to make our way back to being Easter people again today, we need to be reminded about our God's fundamental identity. Which brings us to our text this morning. Psalm 114 is not one of our high profile psalms. It does not get the airtime that the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 46<sup>th</sup> Psalms do. It is quietly tucked into our lectionary as an Easter evening text; after the hoopla has died down and we are left to ponder this resurrection at some remove from the burst of euphoria on Easter Sunday morning. It provides two important and specific portraits of the divine.

The first portrait is one of just how close God is to what is going on in the world. "Judah became God's sanctuary; Israel God's dominion." The divine has chosen to completely commit to a rag-tag group of tribes seeking to flee from slavery. God's focus, devotion and love are placed upon a small group of folks who would otherwise go unnoticed. And then we hear, "Tremble, O Earth, at the presence of the Lord..." In the second portrait, we see a God of absolute and almighty power over all of existence. What may seem immense and immovable to us is a mere plaything in the hands of the divine.



The juxtaposition of these two portraits is remarkable. The first pictures the divine on bended knee, gently guiding a mostly forgotten and insignificant group of people to freedom. The second pictures an entity of ultimate power tossing around all of creation like a child playing with blocks.

So what does this mean for us? Why should these two portraits side by side – one of immense power and one of individual concern – matter for how we live? The end of this psalm tells us how God’s power is put to use. God “turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water.” God does not use God’s power to primarily destroy or needlessly dominate, or self-glorify, but to transform; to transform in ways beyond our imagination; from inert rock to life-giving water in the desert. God transforms what may appear to be useless into what is most necessary. This immensely powerful God in one of the portraits uses this power to bring the most significant change imaginable. And that other portrait teaches us where God’s focus is placed, not on some distant and immense entity, but on a rag-tag group of ex-slaves, and in our case on our rather small personal human dramas.

God is powerful enough to transform absolutely anything at all. And God’s focus is entirely upon each one of us. Whatever part of you feels like it is broken and beyond repair, God is focused intently upon you and powerful enough to heal it. Whatever is unnamed but missing within you, God is focused intently upon you and powerful enough to provide it. Whatever subtly haunts you from your past or your present or your future, God is focused intently upon you and powerful enough to sweep it away.

That innate longing humanity has for transformation will not go unanswered. Whatever emptiness we may feel inside of us is being addressed by our God whose power is beyond measure and whose concern for us personally is beyond our ability to comprehend. In his novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, John Updike describes this experience like this. The character Essie has a physical sensation of God. “God’s love pressed down from heaven and fit her whole body like bathwater in the tub...like blood in your veins that you can sometimes hear when your ear is pressed against the pillow...\* May it be so for each of us, and it will be.



There is a natural denouement the Sunday after Easter. After all of the festival hubbub, we find ourselves with the same bumps and bruises that accompany ordinary life. But the season of Easter is not over. And God's powerful gift of resurrection is still unfolding in each one of us. And the imagination of that rascally six-year-old Calvin is not too far from the truth. There is a transmogrifier in each of our lives. We can and we will be changed. We may not know when. There is no guarantee it will be by noon on Tuesday. The season of Easter is not all major chords and joy on tap. We are all too often reminded that we still carry the imperfections of this life. But as Easter people, we are called to remember that the God who can transform a rag-tag bunch of slaves into a free nation; the God who can transform stone into water in the desert; the God who can transform death on the cross into resurrection life can and will transform us into everything we need and want to be. Easter people are called to have a little imagination to see the possibilities of all that is to come. If precocious, six-year-old Calvin can see it, with God's help, so can we.

*Thanks be to God. Amen.*

\* Schiff, James A., "The Pocket Nothing Else Will Fill." *John Updike and Religion*. Ed. James Yerkes, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 1999. 50-63.