**25 Pentecost**

**November 6, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

I believe that if our faith … our Church … stands for anything at all, it is to transform the world. The Gospel of Jesus is full of talk of the Kingdom of God … that realm where everything is turned upside down and the values of the world finally coincide with God’s values. But, WE are the Church … you and I. WE are the people of faith that are called to be the agents of this transformation … to turn the world upside down … to bring God’s values to bear on the world here and now.

I further believe that we can only be agents of transformation if we have known transformation in our own lives. And I further believe that you wouldn’t be sitting in these pews if you haven’t experienced that transformation in your life one way or another.

That transformation comes in many forms. For some that spiritual transformation was felt when they had that deep knowing that they were a blessed child of God … even when they were feeling rejected by others. Then, in that deep knowing, they saw others in the world around them as blessed children of God also, and that new vision transformed the world around them.

Perhaps your transformation was that sense of spiritual healing in the midst of a horrible illness … even as the treatments continued for your bodily ills … a sense of God’s presence and peace while the doctors and medical staff focused on the malady.

For some of you that transformation may be a divine comfort in the face of horrible loss … such as the losses many have felt in the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew. Or maybe it is strength to face an almost impossible task … like this recovery.

For still others that transformation of spirit is knowing that for whatever misdeeds that one has done in the past that you are a forgiven person … forgiven by God … and that you don’t have to carry that burden of guilt your entire life … and that through God’s acceptance you can accept yourself again and move forward. And moving forward means that you can begin to forgive those around you.

Being transformed by the divine presence of God means that there is more to life for us than this particular moment … that God is always calling us to be more than we are at any given time. And that as we are transformed by that relationship with God we become agents of transformation in the world around us.

I have a fig tree in my yard … right at the corner where our property abuts George Sage’s yard. The fig tree has never produced many figs, but I love the image of having a Biblical tree as part of our landscape. When we returned to our house after Hurricane Matthew it was obvious that the salt water had soaked the roots of the tree and the leaves quickly turned brown and dropped off. The tree has been bare and looked dead. Then this week one leaf appeared … one leaf about 5 inches long … and I was reminded of the verse from Isaiah … *“Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”*

God wants more than what we are at any one moment. God wants of this world we live in to be more than it is at any moment in time. That is the transformation I am speaking about.

My experience tells me that the people of St. Cyprian’s are a transformed people. Individually and collectively we have known the power of God to comfort us in loss, and to strengthen us when we felt weak and vulnerable. This community has experienced healing in its collective life … and, individually, many of the people of St. Cyprian’s have known healing in their particular lives. We are blessed children of God, and in that knowledge we bless the world around us. And we are a people of hope … we know God is calling us to be more than what we are right now … deeper in spirit, stronger in ministry, greater in community. We are not too unlike the people of Jerusalem 2,500 years ago as they return to their city and Temple after 70 years of exile in Babylon.

 The Old Testament reading this week comes from Haggai. Next to Obadiah, it's the shortest book in the Old Testament — barely two pages in my Bible. I wonder how this scrap of a manuscript ever survive the ravages of time and chance so that we still read it 2,500 years later. I'm glad that it did survive, because whereas our churches and culture boast that "bigger is better" and that "size matters," Haggai says that God operates differently.

 Along with Zechariah and Malachi, Haggai is one of the three prophets of the post exile period. These post-exilic prophets ministered to a demoralized remnant that had returned to the ruins of Jerusalem after 70 years of banishment in Babylon. In sixth century before the Common Era the Assyrian King [Nebuchadnezzar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nebuchadnezzar_II_of_Babylon) overran Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and deported the Jews to Babylon.

Over 50 years later Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered the Babylonian king in a battle on the Tigris River near modern-day Baghdad. Cyrus later issued a decree that allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem in order to resettle their lands and to rebuild their ruined temple.

The returning Israelites began on the reconstruction of their ravaged temple, but the effort fizzled out and ground to a halt. A generation had grown up in Babylon who knew nothing of the former splendor of Solomon's temple. In fact, for some younger people who returned, their exilic experience of Judaism involved no temple at all.

In 529 BC Cyrus died. His successor, King Darius, reissued the rebuilding edict, and restoration of the Jerusalem temple began anew. This "second temple," as it is still called today, was completed in the year 515 BC.

A footnote about this “Second Temple”: Five hundred years after King Darius the temple was enlarged and expanded by King Herod 20 years before Jesus was born, but then destroyed by the Romans when they sacked Jerusalem in 70 AD to end the four-year Jewish revolt against Rome. Later, the Romans built their own temple on the site. Then, in the late 7th century, a Muslim shrine was built on the site called the Dome of the Rock. Today the Dome of the Rock sits on the original site of the Jewish temple.

Back to the prophet Haggai: As you would expect, some Jews who were still living then compared the restored second temple with Solomon's original temple; the verdict was inevitable and predictable: "Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing?" Compared to Solomon's temple, the second temple was a meager, pale imitation, and everyone knew it. That much was true.

But the prophet Haggai insisted that God was every bit as present in the modest second temple under the Persian ruler Darius as he had been in the extravagant temple under King Solomon of Israel, or for that matter, under the oppressive regime of King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon when there was no temple at all. The repatriated exiles had to start over. They had to revise their judgments about the modest restoration project and what it did and did not signify about the presence of God in their community. They had to accept their meager circumstances with brutal realism, even as they worked hard to overcome them.

They also had to maintain their confidence in the word that God spoke to them through Haggai: "Be strong, all you people of the land, and work. Rebuild, for I am with you," declared the Lord Almighty. "This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains among you. Do not fear. Despite the outward circumstances, I will bless you, and the glory of the second temple will outshine the splendor of the first temple."

Whether in victorious exodus out of Pharaoh's Egypt, humiliating exile to Nebuchadnezzar's pagan Babylon, or post-exile return to the ruins of Jerusalem under the Persian rulers Cyrus and Darius — God was present among his people. And God is present among us today in the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew.

Most of us experience our share of reversal, exile, defeat, destruction, and catastrophe. Sometimes natural events do this to us. At other times we do this to ourselves. Often there's no apparent reason at all. Our homes, our health, our savings, our jobs and families all include defeats of various sorts, whether a slight skirmish or wholesale devastation.

The outward circumstances of our lives can feel harsh beyond measure, and threaten to diminish our vision. "Does it not seem like nothing?" asked Haggai about the restored temple. Still, God speaks to us today through Haggai's ancient promise: "I am with you, do not fear, my Spirit remains among you. There can be greater glory in your lesser circumstances."

Haggai says that God meets us where we are, not where we wish we could be, even and especially in downsized circumstances like a rebuilt temple in a ravaged Jerusalem … or a home destroyed by Hurricane Matthew. God’s Spirit moves even when we might not see or feel God’s presence. When we least expect it, in the dust and dirt of our lives, God says, "From this day on I will bless you." This is the transformation that the community of Israel experienced 2,500 years ago. It is the same transformation that is available to us … individually and collectively … today.

We are a transformed people. And it is in the faith and power of that transformation that we become agents of God in the transformation of the world. We offer radical hospitality to others because we know what it means to be accepted in the face of rejection. We can offer consolation and comfort to those in grief because we, too, have been comforted by God’s divine presence. We can encourage others because we have been strengthened by our own faith. We can forgive in a world prone to blame because we know that we are a forgiven people.

Being transformed by the divine presence of God means that there is more to life than this moment … that God is always calling us to be more than we are at any given time. And, as we are transformed by that relationship with God, we become agents of transformation in the world around us.

We are a transformed people … individually and collectively … and we are agents of God’s transformation of the world.

Amen.