
Out with the Old, In with the New

2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

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The summer before I left for college I cried most days. It wasn't that I dreaded college. But (to use the language of Paul in his letter to the Corinthians) everything old was passing away! And I knew rather keenly that the life I knew and loved was fundamentally shifting, and really—nothing would ever be the same again. The friends I'd known my whole life were all scattering for college all across my beloved state of Colorado. And I was scattering too, except by myself—to Texas. I was a bit scared and a lot sad to realize my childhood was ending. Everything old was passing away, and I was too grieved to ponder the new thing God was doing. Who but God could imagine that someone who was so sad *to go* to college would still find herself on a college campus two decades later?

In Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, he speaks of what it means to live in Christ. And for Paul it means *everything has changed*. No longer do we regard things from a human point of view; it's like putting on a new pair of glasses—the “Christ-lenses” clarify and correct our vision, and we see the world from a *Godly* point of view. And part of this Godly point of view is recognizing that everything has changed. Already. In Christ, we are a new creation. Paul's enthusiasm and hopefulness prompted me to reflect on how we humans tend to view change and transition, and how God views it. Where we may step forward into change with fear, and doubt, and hesitancy, God invites us to embrace change with hope, and promise, and assurance. In Christ, there is *new creation*. Everything old is passing away, see everything has become new!

I want to talk about three different images that represent ways of old things passing away and becoming new. And how regarding change from a Godly point of view invites us into a posture of trust in when the life you know is passing away. Because new life is always waiting.

The first image is that of shedding skin, like a lizard or a snake. This kind of passing away involves losing or shedding something in order for new life to be revealed. Have you ever seen a snake shed its skin? It's really quite fascinating. For snakes, the skin often comes off in all one piece, like a sock. They will slither around rocks or brush to help remove the old skin shell, and lo and behold, shiny, colorful, *new* skin is *already waiting* underneath. Snakes shed their skin to allow them to grow (their skin doesn't expand with them like human skin does), and it also allows the snake to remove parasites or damage affecting their skin.

Snakes make shedding skin look easy and painless. Even as many of you may know when *we* are shedding parts of ourselves it can be rather uncomfortable or even painful, perhaps especially if you aren't sure you want to shed your skin in the first place. Do you have parts of you you're hoping to shed? Perhaps you'd like to shed a bad reputation, or a hot temper, or a relationship that has become toxic. Or maybe you feel like the skin that constricts you and won't expand is depression or addiction, and you yearn for that skin and all its parasites and damage to detach and finally slough off. It may even be the case that the thing to shed is something good you'd rather cling to, be it a person or community or job. Old snake-skin is not inherently good or bad, it has just lost its usefulness or is preventing the new skin from appearing. The promise of Christ revealed in the snake, (even, or perhaps especially, the snake from the fall in Eden!) is that the skin sheds to *make room for growth*, and that the new life is already there just under the surface, ready and waiting to be revealed. So if you are in a place where God is inviting you to grow but your current skin is holding you back, God may be prodding you to slither and slink and wriggle that skin away and hold fast to the promise of the bright skin underneath ready to take you to the place God is leading.

The second image I want to share is the image of snow. This kind of passing away involves more of a subtle change, one that includes covering and nourishing before new life is revealed. One of my very favorite things in the winter months is when the heavens open, especially after I've gone to bed, and I awaken to the earth covered in sparkling white snow. And for me it always feels like magic—it is nearly impossible to not be

excited. Whatever ugliness or muddiness had been present the night before is now erased under the magic layer of soft white crystals. And the world is silent. It is no wonder that both the prophet Isaiah and the psalmist refer to sins being made white as snow (Psalm 51:7 and Isaiah 1:18), because a fresh snow envelops and brightens and makes beautiful whatever is underneath. And yet the work of snow doesn't stop there. Snow doesn't simply cover over the old world, erasing it so it never seen again. The snow *melts* and is *absorbed* into the earth, nourishing the ground and ensuring that the hard earth of winter will warm and soften and that the seeds underneath will be readied to burst from the earth with new life. The winter snow under the light of the sun *feeds the ground* and leads to a transformed spring landscape of fresh green and flowers and resurrection.

This too is a hopeful image of things passing away. In part because what lies underneath the snow isn't simply erased or lost, but the landscape underneath is changed by its encounter with snow. I wonder if any of you have parts of your journey or parts of your life you actually wish *could* be erased or lost? You may crave a big cosmic eraser to simply undo a series of bad choices, or painful memories, or people who've harmed you. But the gift of God in the image of snow is more interesting than that. This image says "in the economy of God, nothing is lost or wasted, but everything can be transformed." So you may wish that big boulder of heartache would just roll on down the mountain or stay forever buried under the snow, but Christ's promise of new life says, "this boulder will not be erased, but it will be replaced with grass and flowers and moss, so that when people come alongside, they won't just see your pain, but they'll discover in you compassion and understanding and wisdom." So if you are in a situation where you wish parts of your life could be erased, remember the promise of snow, which gently covers then slowly seeps to nourish and awaken the new life God has already planted in you.

The third image of passing away and becoming new that I'd like to explore with you is the classic image of a butterfly. This is the kind of change that involves complete and total transformation in the passage from old life to new life. For years and years I thought that when caterpillars built their cocoons, they basically went inside and lost a few pounds (in comparable caterpillar weight) and then grew some pretty wings. But I discovered not too long ago that is *not* what happens when a caterpillar metamorphosizes into a butterfly. The caterpillar doesn't simply becoming lean and grow wings. Instead the caterpillar is completely transformed. This process is called chrysalis, where the caterpillar's body basically disintegrates—or to our eyes, melts—and becomes a mass of goo that is then completely restructured to become a butterfly! So basically the whole of the caterpillar is broken down into strange, indiscernible goo (that looks nothing like a caterpillar or butterfly) and this goo is basically waiting...waiting for the signal to grow. The new life was there all along, but not yet ready. So this gooey mass within the cocoon is actually a delicate mass of mystery creativity, transforming what once was into something altogether different and altogether beautiful.

I wonder if you ever resonate with the caterpillar? From the outside people may see the hard cocoon and assume everything is okay. But you may feel like the gooey blob inside with no shape or vision or hope for what exactly is happening within this tight, dark space. And you might actually be in a gooey place. It can be a difficult, confusing, and delicate place to be, when you have no sight and you are numb and discombobulated and you don't feel anything like yourself. And it may last for a long time. A caterpillar's transformation may take up to 10 days, and most butterflies live about a month, maybe two, which means chrysalis could reasonably last about a third of the butterfly's life. But you know what? *God's grace is in the goo*, activating and creating and re-fashioning. And the cocoon that surrounds you? It is the safe hands of God, holding and enfolding you (whatever shape you're in) until you're ready to be released. If today you feel a bit numb or discombobulated, or if you are feeling a bit caterpillar-ish and wondering if this is all there is to your life, I want to assure you that you are held in the safe hands of God, who is the artist of your life. And God is creating something new in you, even if it is hidden from you and perhaps hidden from the eyes of the world too.

These three images: the shedding of skin, the falling of snow, and the emergence of the butterfly are all images of promise and hope. They fundamentally remind us that every ending contains hope for a new beginning. This includes death, which Christ has overcome. When we are in Christ, wearing our "Christ-lenses," we no longer see from a human point of view, but instead with the eyes of God. And with this vision

we know we need not fear change, because change was woven into the fabric of creation by our creator, and change opens the way for *new life* and *new hope* and *new growth*. Christ is in the readying of new skin when it's time to grow and shed your old skin. Christ is like the snow that seeps into the landscape of your life to transform all things for his good purposes. And Christ is in the goo of the cocoon completely transforming and enfolding you with strength and grace.

And so Duke Chapel community, this brings me to you. Because Christ has used this community time and time again to lighten my heart and give me hope and help me discover new life. I have loved being your director of worship these last nine years, and have loved this community before that as a member of the Congregation. When I first came to Duke Chapel, I was a couple of years out of seminary, nursing a broken heart, and working for Duke's Office of Information Technology. The Chapel was the place God used to help me re-discover my call to ministry—it was the place I was able to grow so much I realized I could wriggle out of some old skin and discover the new life that was waiting underneath. It turns out that new life included being on staff here. And you all have been the sparking snow that gently covered me and seeped in as I began to grow and flourish in my ministry here. I can't begin to fully express my gratitude that God has allowed my life to intersect with the life of Duke Chapel—I have grown and learned and felt cherished (even in my mistakes). Christ has been the soil, but you have been part of the snowy melt that has nurtured and aided my growth as I've learned to be a pastor. And in the mysterious goo of Christ's cocoon in my life, Duke Chapel will always be one of the ingredients of that goo for me—and I can't help but feel that this particular ingredient has given my wings a depth of color and strength of flight that I may not have received otherwise.

Working at Duke Chapel is one of the gifts and privileges of my life. I have learned so much from *you*—I am moved by the generous acts of faithfulness and hospitality of this community; the incredible dedication and loyalty of our many volunteers and choirs; and the joy, mischief, and thoughtfulness of students. I also want to say a particular thank you to my colleagues at Duke Chapel. The Chapel staff has turned over almost entirely since I arrived, but my affection for the whole array of our staff from past to present is hard to match—it has been a joy and an honor to share in ministry together with so many amazing people. And this isn't just the Sunday morning folks, but the many others who are so integral to the Chapel's life, but whose work is often hidden.

In this job I have laughed, and I have loved, and I have dreamed. And so my hope is that I will not cry today. And if I do, it is not because the old things are passing away, but because I am overwhelmed by the good promise that in Christ God is making all things new—for me and for Duke Chapel. *The best is yet to come*. My gratitude outweighs my grief. And so I say again thank you. Thank you for your faithfulness to the living God, and the new life you've helped me discover in this place.

May the Lord bless you and keep you

The Lord make His face shine upon you,

And be gracious to you;

May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you,

And give you peace.