

6/14/09 Sermon
Rev. Catherine Nichols

One of my favorite poems, by Richard Wilbur--former poet laureate and writer about things that matter....that's what poetry is....things that matter--is called "A Measuring Worm." A Measuring Worm: "This yellow striped green caterpillar climbing up the steep window screen, constantly (for lack of a full set of legs) keeps humping up its back. It's as if he's sent by a sort of semaphore. Dark omegas meant to warn of Last Things. Although he doesn't know it, he will soon have wings, and I, too, don't know towards what undreamt condition, inch by inch, I go.

And I stressed the rhyme scheme, which is hard to recognize when the poem is heard. When it is read, the rhyme scheme is at once apparent, because it's the last word of every first and third line of each verse. It's kind of fun, to discover poetry that rhymes, that's been written recently. But I'm going to read it again, ignoring the rhyme--which makes it less bumpy--but perhaps more readily understood:

A Measuring Worm
This yellow striped green
Caterpillar, climbing up
The steep window screen.

Constantly, (for lack
Of a full set of legs) keeps
Humping up his back.

It's as if he's sent
By a sort of semaphore
Dark omegas meant

To warn of Last Things.
Although he doesn't know it,
He will soon have wings.

And I too, don't know
Towards what undreamt condition.
Inch by inch I go.

Well, first I had to look up semaphore. How many of you know that word? It's about signaling...flags...railroad signs--you know, the signs that are like "that" (crossed arms) at railroads...those are all semaphores. So, the caterpillar sends a semaphore--a signal--and when he humps, he's shaped like Omega, the final letter of the Greek alphabet. And so, the "end" letter. God, is described as Alpha and Omega--the beginning and the end. "It's as if he's sent by a sort of semaphore, dark omegas meant to warn of Last Things." And then it goes on to warn of last things: "Although he doesn't know it, he will soon have wings."

It's about transformation, isn't it? Transformation...although he doesn't know it, he soon will have wings. And the poem concludes: "And I too, don't know toward what undreamt condition, inch by inch, I go."

Well, today we heard the familiar parable of the mustard seed. Some of us find it comforting, some colorful...think of the color of mustard as it grows in fields here in the Western world...that whole thought that a tiny seed will grow into a huge bush. It's a message of hope within the metaphor of transformation. And it parallels, in some ways, the reading from Ezekiel, in which God promises that a sprig will become, in time, a noble cedar tree. The sprig, to huge tree, is a metaphor that God will transform the people of Judah...who in the prophet Ezekiel's time, are frozen in exile...that God will transform them into a mighty nation. Transformation..."Although he doesn't know it, he soon will have wings, and I too don't know, toward what undreamt condition, inch by inch, I go."

Caterpillar to butterfly. Butterfly--symbol of resurrection. A new creation. Paul, in that portion of Corinthians II that we just heard, tell us "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." What an apt verse, for us, in these times of economic difficulty. Anyone in Christ, there is a new creation. If you've read this month's Episcopal Life, you will have seen an article headlined: "Parishes Employ Good Ideas For Hard Times." The story opens with "pulling through by pulling together" is the motto of the Career Corner at Calvary--a website page of Calvary Church in Pittsburgh. So I checked out that website. It's creative missionary work, for members of Calvary, and their friends. It's working with those who might lose, or have lost, their work. For instance, it gives tips on stress-management, resume design, interview tactics--even tips on "how to feel less lonely in a tight squeeze." You're working at a job, because you don't know which of you won't be there next week--that's the "tight squeeze." Many of us, are there now.

This website lists job opportunities, employment sites, career/website hyperlinks in the Pittsburgh area. And it even includes information on free legal help. Student internship opportunities...even foreclosure help. "The embarrassment often accompanying job loss, can lead to silence," writes a retired human resources professional, who is on the Parish Council at Calvary--and who helped birth this idea. "Instead of waiting to hear about folks' employment and financial difficulties, why not be proactive," she comments. It's so successful, that parish leaders across the country, are now setting up similar sites. It's a transformation into a church family of resurrection--from a church family where "secrets" were being kept.

The "humping caterpillar" of job loss, home loss, job insecurity, morphed into a butterfly of hope for the people of Calvary Church Pittsburgh. Our Senior Connect program at Trinity--funded by a creative member of Trinity, who early on recognized that this economic downturn would seriously affect low-income and homeless elderly in our area of Portland--this is a new creation. I believe this is only part of what Paul meant when he wrote, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." Now Paul expected the world to end very soon...a new creation of the Kingdom of God...which he believed might occur anytime now. Through faith in the Risen Christ, Paul expects a New Age to come, and writes that transformation has already begun.

Well...2000 years later--although I'm no theologian--I'm convinced that "being in Christ" includes expecting and seeking transformation...over and over. New life...over and over. From something small--like a mustard seed--something huge can grow. Senior Connect, may well become "a noble cedar," once it's well-established here in north-west Portland. The helpful metaphor of "sprig to noble tree,"..."tiny mustard seed to huge bush," offers hope of transformation in myriad ways.

Dean Lupfer last week announced various staff changes here at Trinity. Well, we all have two ways to respond. We can hunker down and feel sorry for ourselves, or we can choose to grow as a result of the challenges shrinking revenues present. Senior Connect is only one way we--the community of Trinity Cathedral--will respond to what feels like a crisis. We are "in Christ." We can "through Christ," become over and over, new creations. Dean Lupfer has spoken widely--in the Forum last week about our current situation, in his sermon last week, with us...his staff, for several months, with the Vestry and Chapter of this Cathedral, who have worked for several months, about finding new models of responsible ministry. Of Pastoral Care for those among us, of Education and Community for all of us, of Outreach for those affected by these tough times. We have an opportunity to discern together, how we will continue to be "in Christ" together.

"This yellow striped green caterpillar, climbing up the steep window screen" ...
"Although he doesn't know it--he will soon have wings. And I too don't know, toward what undreamt condition, inch by inch, I go." Richard Wilbur's poem, admits of unknowing. But it also offers hope--the hope that transformation will indeed occur. I very much look forward to all of us, working together to achieve a new creation here at Trinity Cathedral. We are "in Christ,"...we can be a new creation. And I too, don't know toward what undreamt condition, inch by inch, I go. Amen.