**4 Lent, March 10, 2013, Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32**

Ah yes, springtime is just around the corner. I can almost envision butterflies floating around flowers in my yard. Well almost, not quite. Butterflies are amazing creatures aren't they? They experience what is called "complete metamorphosis" which means that they totally change form during their life cycle, which takes anywhere from one month to a whole year, depending upon the species. When the egg hatches it becomes a slimy ugly caterpillar, which eats and grows and molts a few times until finally a chrysalis forms, from which the butterfly hatches. Who would guess that such a beautiful creature as a butterfly would emerge from something as unsightly as a caterpillar? This kind of transformation is amazing isn't it?

When we think of humans, we don't think of us changing like this do we? But, the butterfly is used as a symbol for how God can transform us, if we let Him. Paul wrote about this in our 2nd Corinthians reading today. He said:**“*if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”*** So, it is possible to cast off old habits or the burdens that weigh us down. These are wonderful words to hear, but how does this actually happen? What does it really mean that, **"*everything has become new!"*** We know that Paul is not talking about one of those TV makeover or remodeling shows where they go into a person's house or closet, and throw everything away and start over again. No, that is not it. This is about our lives.

The key to this passage are the two words "***in Christ***." Maybe you have come here today with something that burdens you, something you want to leave behind. Maybe you are gripped in or trapped by a bad habit or something you regret. To deal with these things people tend to do one of two things: either turn to all sorts of unhealthy things or try to change on their own, from their own will power. Neither of these work; we can't rely only on ourselves to transform ourselves. We are just too weak. The key is "***in Christ.***"

It is now the 4th Sunday in Lent, and this is the fourth week we have been talking about the theme for Lent: repentance, the active turning away from things that are not of God and turning towards God. When we rely on God to help us, the "new" comes in - the old stuff is replaced by the new. Most people today, think that Christian faith means believing in our heads that a set of Christian beliefs are true. Faith is much more than this; faith involves our whole selves. Just as the butterfly changed completely, we change when we are "***in Christ,"*** united with God in a deep way, sharing in the risen life of Jesus and trusting in God. Discovering that kind of faith is what today is about, and Jesus tells us the parable of the prodigal son to help us understand.

The prodigal son had gotten himself into a miserable situation. He had squandered his property, led a immoral life, spent everything, even his whole inheritance (which he got early, as his dad was still alive). This guy had messed up so badly that he was at the bottom of the bottom. To be caring for the pigs in that society was worse than eating out of garbage cans in our society. Where was he to turn, in light of own bad choices? The Gospel tells us that, "***he came to himself,*** " which means he decided to away from his selfish ways. Verse 20 tells us what he did next: **“*he set off and went to his father.”***The father, of course, is God. This is the tense, scary point in the story, because we know human behavior - we know what fathers do to sons who mess up this badly and come crawling home. Yeah, they either get disowned (told, "you are no longer my son") or they are treated with great anger and shunning. This guy expected to face one of these scenarios. His expectations were low -- the best he expected was to be able to be one of his father's "***hired hands***." And, what does the father do -- in light of the unforgiveable behavior of the son? The Gospel tells us "***while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.***" The father not only accepted him back no questions asked, he actually ran to him! Oh, the son did give a sincere apology, but the father was so overjoyed that he planned a grand party to honor his son who had ***been lost and now was found***. This is the outlandishness of God who does impossible things with impossible people, us. The son’s new life is a life transformed by the father’s love.

Here is a story called "The Rock." A woman had a teenage daughter, who was becoming increasingly rebellious. It culminated late one night when the police arrested her daughter for drunk driving. Mom had to go to the police station to bail her out. Once at home, her mother did not speak to her. The daughter got more and more scared about her punishment. The next afternoon, the Mom broke the tension by giving her daughter a small gift- wrapped box. Her daughter timidly opened it expecting something awful, and all she found was a little rock inside the box. She rolled her eyes and said, “**Cute, Mom, what’s this for?**” Her mom said, **“Read the card.”**  The daughter took the card out of the envelope and read it. Tears started to trickle down her cheeks. She got up and lovingly hugged her mom as the card fell to the floor. On the card were these words: “**This rock is more than 200,000,000 years old. That is how long it will take before I give up on you.”**  God's love is even more than this for us.

Maybe you can't relate to the prodigal son or the rebellious teenager, but you can relate to Charlotte. Charlotte Elliott was English, born this coming week in the year 1789. One day, when she was 45 years old, Charlotte was ill and weak. In her town, a bazaar was going to be held and everyone in the whole town was contributing to it - except Charlotte. She sat at home, consumed with a sense of uselessness; she questioned her whole spiritual life and her value. The bazaar day came, and she was despondent about her lack of value. She turned to God. God led her to take out a paper and pen, and guided her writing down these words (words from hymn #693 we will soon sing): **" Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bidst me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come. Just as I am, thou wilt receive, wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve; because thy promise I believe, O Lamb of God, I come, I come. "**

God is waiting for us, no matter what. Set out to Christ, take the initiative, and ***"in Christ"*** you will find the old slug caterpillar left behind and you will become freer than a butterfly. Amen.