

A New Suit

Hosea 11:1-7
Colossians 3:1-11

Our text this morning comes from Colossians 3:9-10: "...seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." Understanding this sentence relies on understanding who that creator is and what that image really means. Spoiler alert: the creator is God incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. The new nature is deeper than appearances. It goes deeper than avoiding the sinful behaviors listed in the previous verses, even deeper than engaging in the positive behaviors listed in the following verses. We will explore this in detail in a few moments. But first, a story.

In 1980, at 23 years of age, Laura Klehr Barnett was planting flowers when she started feeling dizzy. After a few minutes she started having seizures. One of her foster children found her rolling around and, remembering only that you could call for help, pressed speed dial #1 on the kitchen wall phone. (It was 1980, we all had one at the time.) Speed dial #1 was Laura's husband. After hearing the tearful child's story he called 911. In the ambulance Laura had a stroke. She would lie flat on her back in a hospital bed for the next five weeks. She could only cry and blink. After almost a month she abruptly laughed at something her husband did. With intense therapy she regained partial control of her body but could not speak for nearly a year. When she

could finally manage a slurred communication her first words were, “We're going to church.” This surprised her husband because the last time they had entered a sanctuary had been on the day of their wedding.

This story appears in Barnett's book Blink Twice for Yes. In it she explains she had not made a deal with God. You know, “God, if I can speak again I will repay you with attendance.” She had other motivations. One was she thought it would good for their foster children. Another was her ordeal had taught her the sweetness and fragility of life. She felt its mystery and power. It made her feel God *must* be real. They started attending a small country church. They joined through profession of faith. Faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. This moment was important, but Barnett writes it did not instantly change them into “holy and happy people”. Nor did she experience an instant, miraculous recovery of her physical and speech capabilities. Instead, her spiritual and physical recoveries took time. She suffered setbacks. But the long-term trend was up. I recommend her book for its insightful and modest telling of her story.

When the Apostle Paul writes that we have “put on the new nature”, he means that our faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior puts us “in Christ”. Once we have become in Christ our transformation into a nature more nearly resembling his begins. Instead of remaining caught in evil desires and covetousness, we live in compassion, kindness and the rest. Frederick Beuchner is a Presbyterian pastor and author of dozens of thoughtful, faithful books. In his 1977 number, Treasure Hunt, Beuchner takes issue with a common simile. A favorite image of Billy Graham's—among others—this simile

says that giving yourself to Jesus is like putting on a new suit. “Not at all,” Beuchner wrote. “We do not obscure ourselves behind some sort of costume. Rather, we transform our nature into being more like Christ. As Paul put it, we are 'renewed in knowledge after the image of (our) creator.'”

Our new knowledge precipitates our transformation. But what sort of knowledge does this involve? John Calvin opens his Institutes of the Christian Religion with an extensive treatment of the knowledge of God and God's purposes. He establishes that we gain this knowledge of God through God's implanting it in us from the moment of creation, through prayer, and through study of God's Word. He writes, “Knowledge of God, then, ought not only to arouse us to the worship of God, but also to awaken and encourage us to the hope of the future life.” Our knowledge of God moves us to worship God, to hope for life everlasting and to become ever more Christlike. Furthermore, our knowledge of God creates faith. Late in the two-volume work Calvin returns to this idea with, “...newness of life is conferred on us by Christ and is attained by us through faith.” The new life, new image, new nature—whatever you want to call it, comes to us through the work of Christ as we come to believe in him.

I know we have waded pretty deeply into the weeds here. And often we find the need to clarify the complicated things Paul wrote. This time, however, he gives us a concise summary of his point. Put on the new nature. It comes to us through our God-given knowledge of God. The new nature helps us conform ourselves to the image of Christ. (Remember, “image” here does not mean physical appearance. It

means, rather, the whole of the person of God. It means we become better able to think like God, love like God, to act in God's name.) For example, a church filled with people in Christ has no serious divisions. As Paul illustrates this point, he points to those in Christ no longer having Jew or Greek, male or female, etc.

For the second week in a row I have ignored our Old Testament lesson. This happened because our passages from Colossians have been so dense, so rich. Today, because we still need to apply that passage to our church life, and in that life we will celebrate the ordination of a deacon later in this worship service, we need to get to that application. I am tempted to lift up something putting on this new nature causes us to **do**. I feel led, instead, to lift up something it causes us to **be**. For one thing, we already do a great deal around here, and the workers—while willing and faithful—have more than enough on their plates. Let us therefore set our minds on the things that are above. When we put on the new nature, we become more like Jesus.

I saw an example of this last Sunday. Two members of this church stood out on the Larry Bird sidewalk and talked about an extremely hot issue. I heard only the very end of their conversation. But their tone of voice and body language clearly conveyed they had conducted themselves with kindness and forbearance. They had conformed to the image of Christ sufficiently to be able to have one of those difficult discussions. It warmed my heart greatly. I do not say they **are** Jesus. I say they have become more **like** Jesus. Let us all seek to do that very thing. Put on the new nature. Become more like your Lord and Savior.