

“Transformed, Yet Still Transforming”

**Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, February 7, 2016
Transfiguration of the Lord**

Readings from Scripture: Exodus 34:29-35 and Luke 9:28-36

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Exodus 34:29-35

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Luke 9:28-36

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, you offer us your living word, words to transform us, to inspire us and to challenge us. Be with us now as we wrestle with your word, consider its meaning for us and respond to your call. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

I don’t know about you, but I always find the transfiguration passage to be an unsettling one. It’s mysterious and odd and challenging. And every year when it comes up, I think “Here we go again.” But I take comfort knowing I’m not alone. I said to a colleague the other day, “Transfiguration Sunday is coming, what are you going to do with it?” He gave me a knowing laugh. So I looked at my last sermon on the topic and was reminded that this uncertainty still exists. Wikipedia dictionary states that the Greek origins for the word for transfiguration is “lacking in etymology or has an incomplete etymology,” and ended with this: “You can

help us by giving it a proper etymology.” i.e. we really don’t know. But if we look at another word from its root, metamorphosis as the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly, we gain insight. Because Jesus is described as one who is changed, transformed from appearing normal one moment to dressed in dazzling white and shining in glory the next.

Now the reading starts out with things going normally enough. Jesus invites some of the disciples to walk with him up to the top of the mountain. It’s when they get to the top that everything changes. He is transformed from his everyday attire and shines in white glory and I would imagine they were stunned. He is also not alone. Moses and Elijah are there, too, which makes sense. Consider the reading that Eric shared with us. It was about Moses going up to the mountain to talk to God and coming back with his face shining. In scripture we do not read that Elijah died. He is taken up by chariots of fire into the heavens.

It is then, though, that Peter makes a rather odd suggestion: that they build three dwelling places for the three men. However, before they could do anything like that, there was a cloud that descended and they heard a voice. It echoes from Jesus’ baptism: “This is my Son, the Chosen, listen to him.” And suddenly all the razzle dazzle stops. And Jesus looks as he did before. In Mark’s version of the transfiguration, we read that Jesus leads them down the mountain, telling them to keep quiet about this until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead. I am sure the event startled and unsettled the three who were with him. So just what does this mean?

Joan Chittister, who is a very pastoring nun who I really appreciated, reflects on this passage, saying, “The apostles received brand-new insight into whom this Jesus really was--dazzling and literally enlightening--one who is transformed and is transforming them.” She thinks that Peter’s desire to building the buildings is opting for a religion of temples and institutions. And it makes sense as this gospel was written not long after the destruction of the temple. But she notes that before he even finished speaking, God interrupts and says, “This is my Son.” Then something happens that we too often forget. As it says in Mark, at the very moment when it would seem that he is emphasizing the mystical and transcendent dimensions of faith, Jesus himself take them down the mountain, back to the valley below, back to real life and in doing so, he connects them with the ones who need them most--the people who hurt, the people who struggle, the ineffective institutions and the demons that seem to be possessing many. After this they see Jesus differently and their roles feel different, too. So what does this say to us today? Can we be transformed? Chittister says, “Yes we can, if we are open to such moments. Because Joan proclaims that life on earth in our faith is lived out in the here and now. It’s about healing hurts and being with the poor and the forgotten who are at the bottom of life as well as the mountain. Real religion, deep faith, scripture insists, is not about transcending life here on earth, it’s about transforming life here on earth”. So she suggests that we are to be transformed and continually transforming.¹

Just a couple of weeks ago, Scott and I watched a repeat episode of 60 Minutes called “Alive and Kickin’.” It reflected in so many ways to me some of the issues being lifted up in the sermon today and in the passages--that the power and possibilities of both faith and music can lead us not only in worship but transform us. The interviewer was Lesley Stahl and she opened with talking to a woman named Vy Higginsen who was a theater producer and former disc jockey who works and lives in Harlem. She felt this calling to help preserve a very rich part of American music: gospel, soul and rhythm and blues. She decided to seek out people to help her do that. She wanted people who were 55 and older, who had enjoyed singing whether it was in a church choir or at home or in other ways, but not as their main means of earning a living. She wanted them to sing and to also share their life experiences and struggles. She found the voices that she thought would work well together and she found that the stories they shared were more powerful than she had ever imagined.

There was the story of one mother who sang about the pain of saying farewell to children as they did just what she encouraged them to do--to leave home, go away to college, begin their lives. Then there was Theo Harris who had been in and out of prison for 40 years until he made a move that really changed his life. During his time in prison he got a college degree. Then he got a degree in play writing, and a woman who came to help play a part in something that he wrote was someone he ended up falling in love with. They got married. When he was out of prison, though, he made another slip up. He was so sure that she would walk away. But she didn't and together they worked it out and now he is on a different path.

There was a woman named Debbie Bingham who loved to sing but she became a nurse in order to earn a living. Little did she know how important that would become when it came to caring for her son. He was diagnosed with cancer at 34 and for four years she nursed him. But he did not survive. She said his death broke her heart and her spirit. "There was a time when I couldn't tell this story to anyone without bursting into tears." But she said singing about it has helped.

Then there was Matthew Burke who shared his story of loss and violence. He knew nothing of his earliest years because he had gone from foster home to foster home, feeling aimless and unsure that he mattered. He sold drugs and committed armed robberies. Slowly he worked his way out of prison, but still he felt very empty within. Then someone found his case file and he learned about the first few weeks of his life. He learned that he was abandoned at the age of two and a half weeks, left in a hallway in an office building. The file said "mother unknown, father unknown." And Lesley said to him, "You didn't have a name, did you? You were simply known as A2360 for "abandoned #2360." He said a young priest named me Matthew Burke while I was in foster care, but really truth be told my name was a number for many years. My first prison number was 81A3684; then later 00A6432. Lesley Stahl said to him, "I know a psychiatrist who says the most important question I ask someone is, 'when you were growing up, who loved you unconditionally?'" And his reply was poignant, "I've never, ever experienced that." But the discovery of this information and this chance to sing was a turning point. He began to turn from anger at being abandoned to considering the possibility that his birth mother had left him because she thought it was best, that he might be given the opportunity for a better life with someone else. He said, "What I finally realized is that not only had I needed a name, I needed a name for my mother." He decided that if he could figure out a name, he could sing to her what was on his heart and express all the questions and thoughts he had. So he named her Georgia, and he sang the song that Ray Charles sang--the version of Georgia--with deep feeling and emotion interspersed with the thoughts and the questions he had wanted to ask, trying to understand why she felt she must let him go. Maybe you were too young. Maybe you were afraid. Maybe you just didn't know what to do. He told Lesley Stahl that "when I took part in the show and sang to her, I felt a sense of healing and it's really been quite a healing process for me." Lesley said, "You told us that you feel like you are floating now." And he said, "Ever since I auditioned for this show, I've been floating." And she said, "You're still floating." And he said, "I haven't been down since."

And so it was with the others. Debbie Bingham, the mother who nursed her dying son said the show that they produced together transformed her for it helped her to heal. She said, "I learned that it's never too late for anything. I'm not that sad lady I was before and things will be okay." It was clear to me that for all those Lesley Stahl interviewed, this time of sharing and singing together was a time of transformation and it came through word, music and song. 2

So my sermon title, "Transformed, Yet Still Transforming" was one I picked because it paralleled the words attributed to John Calvin and a motto of our denomination: reformed and always reforming. We are invited by faith through word, prayer or song to be healed and to be nourished, to be those who are transformed and still transforming. I think that transfiguration Sunday is a reminder that faith is far more than an intellectual exercise or about what we can get out of it. Following Jesus calls us not only to be transformed as individuals,

but to be those who help transform the world and bring about the kingdom of God here on earth. When we live as those who are transformed, we become a part of bringing God's kingdom here on earth. We are those who do so through words and deeds that offer healing and peace and hope. Praise be to God from whom all our blessings flow. Amen.

1 Sr. Joan Chittister, "The Role of Religion in Today's Society," on Chicago Sunday Evening Club, "Thirty Good Minutes," (Chicago, Ill.: November 24, 1991), no. 3508.

2 "Alive and Kickin'" episode of 60 Minutes with Leslie Stahl as shown in repeat on January 24, 2016