

“A Religious Experience”
Exodus 24:12-18 & Matthew 17:1-9

Transformation Sunday
Sermon by Jan Edmiston
February 6, 2005

About this time every year, we read this story of Jesus standing on top of *a high mountain* with three of his disciples when something extraordinary happened. Something we cannot understand. Something we can barely articulate.

Jesus became transfigured. His *biology* actually changed. When we hear that his face shone like the sun, this is no mere simile. Jesus face *became* as dazzling as the star around which our planetary system revolves. Even his clothing changed to become blindingly bright. It is believed that **this was but a glimpse of what Jesus’ true self looked like**. And it was glorious.

Two *other* figures appeared – Moses and Elijah. But Peter misunderstood what that meant. And when it looked like the final result of this amazing event would be simple, utter fear, *Jesus came and touched* the disciples and said, “Get up and do not be afraid.”

This is the story we always hear the Sunday before Lent begins – that season when we focus on *giving up* something, *taking on* something, suffering, repentance, fasting, deep spiritual anguish. The forty days before Easter minus the Sundays.

It was during Lent last year that Mel Gibson released *The Passion of the Christ* – a film so brutal, so bloody that we could not help but be filled with sorrow.

Mel Gibson is a faithful Catholic. But in the 1970s, another faithful Catholic – Mother Assumpta, a French Benedictine nun – said in an interview that she preferred the Eastern Orthodox Church way of looking at Lent rather than the way we Westerners see it. In the Eastern Church, the emphasis during Lent is not on suffering and fasting at all; the emphasis involves believers seeking the *pure, dazzling joy of Christ* like in the Transfiguration.¹

The focus of Lent becomes the fact that *we* – human beings like Peter and James and John, human beings like Moses – might be transfigured *ourselves* just like Jesus. The hope is that in these coming 40 days of Lent, we might have *a religious experience* that transforms us into being more like our true selves.

¹ Jenks, Kathleen. *Mything Links - An Annotated & Illustrated Collection of Worldwide Links to Mythologies, Fairy Tales & Folklore, Sacred Arts & Sacred Traditions*.
<http://www.mythinglinks.org/euro~eastern.html>

Last fall I witnessed a soccer mom on the sidelines explode over a call against her daughter. When another parent warned her that the team could be hit with a yellow card because of her temper, she said, “I can’t help it. I’m Irish. Just look at my hair.”

She was excusing herself her fiery temper because of heredity and her red hair, as if these things predetermined her behavior. But we all do this:

My people are stingy.

I’ve always been stubborn.

I can’t help myself. I’m German, Italian, Russian, Egyptian, etc. etc.

The truth is that, because **Jesus** was transformed on that mountaintop, we can be transformed too – by this same power. We are more than our biology. We are children of God.

When we see a person– **any person** – face to face, no matter what that person’s physical appearance might be, we are seeing the divine at work.

The President of Harvard, Lawrence Summers, got into trouble when he told a conference on women and science last month that perhaps there are fewer women in scientific fields because their genes or the wiring of their brains somehow leave them less fit than men for math, and therefore for science.²

The outrage that followed made the news for weeks. But the truth is that men and women’s brains actually **do** function quite differently. Nevertheless, science shows that two children who are very similar biologically can achieve in two very different ways. And two children who are wired differently can both attain the same results. We are not the sum of our biological parts.

In other words, no one denies that there are biological differences; the problem comes when we say that *biology determines a person’s ability*. If we are truly **children of God**, then there is something about us that only God can determine. There is something about us that – in spite of our biology – God can transform.

One of the most spiritually aware people who has ever lived in our time was Thomas Merton. Merton’s childhood was terrible and he died in an accident at the young age of 53. But the life he lived in those brief years was spiritually stellar.

² Dean, Cornelia. “For Some Girls, the Problem With Math Is That They’re Good at It,” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2005. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/01/science/01math.html?oref=login>

Merton left teaching at Columbia University to become a Trappist monk at Our Lady of Gethsemani monastery outside Louisville, Kentucky. He saw and experienced things in a way that most of us are too distracted to see or experience.

The story goes that he one day, as he walked around downtown Louisville, he began to notice that every person he encountered seemed to be shining, their faces glowing. Old and young. Beautiful and not-so-beautiful. Male and female. As he watched the faces of those who passed him by, something powerful came over him, almost like a dream. This is what he wrote about it:

I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race which God himself became incarnate. . . . If only everybody could realise this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun." If we could all see ourselves as we really are, he reflected, "there would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed...."³

Imagine what the world would be like if we all realized that *we are more than we think we are*, more than we *appear* to be.

Transfiguration seems to be the perfect model for Lent, and isn't this the point? That when we turn our own faces toward Jesus, *we* – like Jesus himself – *can be transformed into light*, into the people we were created to be?

The story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is told in all four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But Matthew is the only version that adds: do not be afraid.

Get up and do not be afraid.

Never again, can we “this is just the way I am.” No, God can transform us into something different.

I close with another prayer I've used before, also written by Thomas Merton. If you are interested, there are copies of the prayer in the narthex to reflect upon during your Lenten Journey. Imagine coming out on the other end of Lent filled with such joy that we are changed forever. There would truly be resurrection.

Let us pray:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think that I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.

³ From *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* by Thomas Merton.
http://www.geocities.com/ganesh_gate/merton.html

But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this
you will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always
though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.⁴

⁴ From "Thoughts in Solitude" by Thomas Merton, Abbey of Gethsemani.