

Sermon on The Transfiguration of Jesus

SERMON For Saint John's Episcopal Church

Beverly Farms, Massachusetts

The Transfiguration of Jesus

By Jamie Coats

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Last Sunday after Epiphany

Readings: Exodus 24:12-18, 2 Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9, Psalm 99

Reference: Luke 9:37-43

Thank you for inviting me to your beautiful church to reflect on the Transfiguration. I bring you greetings from the Brothers of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, the Episcopal monks, – a wonderful band of kind men for whom I work. I know that you have invited the Brothers here on many occasions. They are grateful and send their love.

In today's reading we learn of two different men in different times who went up to the mountain top, communed with God, and came down to the valley. The messages of Moses and Jesus are very different.

We hear in the last verse of Psalm 99 that we should:

“Proclaim the greatness of the LORD our God

and worship him upon his holy hill; \*

for the LORD our God is the Holy One.”

We are to “worship him upon his holy hill.” I believe that in the story we hear today in the New Testament Jesus disagrees, it is not enough to worship God upon his holy hill. We have to be able to come down the mountain, into the valley and look into each others eyes and see the love of God.

But let us go back to Moses. He goes up to the mountain top. He is changed and he brings down badly needed laws, the Ten Commandments that patterned God's love into the lives of the wandering Israelites, and to a great extent patterns our lives to this day. This is good top-down stuff.

But you can have too much of top-down. By Jesus' time the laws brought down by Moses had been expanded upon, a purity system had developed, by a few, who so-to-speak claimed the mountain top for

themselves and dictated from their elite height how the rest of us were to live. People were kept in their place, told what they could do, could not do, who was in, who was out, who was loved by God, who was not.

Jesus shows up and starts breaking these purity rules. We hear time and time again the religious authorities being appalled at Jesus' behavior including daring to heal on the Sabbath. What message does Jesus bring down the mountain?

I have it on good authority that in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition it is held that nothing happened to Jesus at the Transfiguration, he was not changed. He already was the son of God, the man of light. What changed was the disciples, the love of God flowed through them too. What changed because of Jesus is the knowledge that the love of God flows through every one of us, without exception. Orthodox icons of the Transfiguration show the light infusing everyone.

Understanding this explains the story that Luke tells about what happened on the next day. Luke describes how Jesus is off the mountain in the valley amid a big crowd. A man comes to him whose son is desperately ill, in the clutches of an unclean spirit, and he tells Jesus that the disciples have not been able to help. Jesus first rolls his eyes at the disciples saying ""You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" In other words, don't you get it, you have the power to heal this boy too, why don't you heal him. He says some unrecorded words to the boy and the boy is healed.

Through my association with the Brothers of the Society of Saint Evangelist I think I have an idea of how Jesus connected to the pain in the boy and also what you and I are capable of doing to help heal each other and bring in God's light.

In 2010 I found myself in a similar situation to the man in Luke's story whose son was ill. Except in my case it was not my child but my oldest sibling, my sister Emma. She was hospitalized in a psychiatric hospital in Oxford, England. I flew back and forth to England with my boss at the time, Br. Curtis giving me all the time I needed. Sadly there was no Jesus to say the necessary words to Emma, to connect with her and release her pain. She went missing, there was a large police search. Nine days later we learned of an unidentified body at the foot of a sea cliff. We knew it was her from the description.

Just before I flew from Boston to England to organize services for Emma Brother Curtis called me. He had known me for four years and he is pretty good at looking into another person's soul. He said, "I have been praying for a word for you to take with you, the word "wonder" keeps coming to me." I thanked him but felt it would be a long time before I ever felt wonder again.

The year before Emma died she wrote a long poem that described a walk through a wood in Devon, England. On what would have been her 50th birthday we gathered with her friends where Emma described sitting at the river's edge. We read her whole poem. I waded in and poured Emma's ashes into the river, into her poem. At that moment I was flooded with wonder.

Afterwards, to work through my grief I wrote a series of poems called the "Grief & Wonder Trilogy." The first poem goes:

We all have tragedy.

Will it hold us

And we pass it on

Tragically?

Or can we let

Our friends hold us

So hold our own tragedy

And then let it like ash

Spread into the stream

Returning to the cycle

Of a greater love

And experience wonder?

Br. Curtis had looked into my soul, knew what I needed and gave me one word, Wonder. It is an amazing spiritual gift that one man or woman can do that for another. I am not a monk. I am not very good at looking into the soul of another and producing the right word, as Curtis did for me and Jesus did for the boy.

But we are told that Jesus knows that we can transfigure one another. That is the story of the Transfiguration, it is about you and me helping each other. It is about us letting our friends hold us. It is not about truth on high coming down the mountain top. It is about when you greet each other after this service. Jesus knows that we can transfigure each other, even in coffee hour.

And here is one way I have been learning about Transfiguration. Some of you may be aware that the Brothers publish a very short daily meditation by email call "Brother, Give Us A Word." A couple of years ago in 2012 I was joking with the Brothers that in Lent we could ask instead for friends to "Give up a Word."

So I thought I would give it a try. I set off to ask anyone I might encounter the following:

If you could give up a word for a week that would transform your life for the better, what would it be?

What happened amazed me and continues to.

A woman told me that in her head she always called her self “Stupid” as her mean older sister had done when she was little and felt destined to go the grave calling herself “Stupid” until she gave up the word.

Br. David Vryhof said to me that he needed to give up “Should” because other wise at the end of day he can’t be grateful to God.

Once on a plane a fellow passenger gave up the word “daughter” to her own horror and went on to explain how she struggles to relate to her daughter. She spent her life saving to put her daughter through college and currently her daughter is not saving for her own children’s college and this causes this lady so much anguish.

I have asked people in bars, restaurants and planes. I should warn you that that asking this question in Gloucester produces very salty replies.

A few words can transform a situation and it is transforming me. I was at an airport restaurant and I was grumpy. But for some reason I asked the waitress if she would like to give up a word. Her word was “No.” Then she said, “I say it to my little boy all the time but if I gave up “No” I am scared I would hit him. I am so tired. I so need a vacation.” I went from grumpy to tears.

In another restaurant the food was terrible. I had even sent the coffee back because it was cold. But when I asked the waiter if he would like to give up a word, he smiled joyously, and also told me that his word was “No” because he needed to begin saying “Yes” to more things in his life. Our whole relationship changed. The food was still awful but our time together was good.

What I have been learning with these conversations is that we can break our own top-down, from on high, purity system and bring healing this Sabbath day. All we need is simple words of the heart. Not your normal, conventional phrases like “What do you do?” or “How do you do?” Or even “How are you?”

When greeting people if we try phrases like “What do you most love to do?” “What is your life dedicated to?” “What is your passion?” the world will change. Today I invite you to ask each other “If you could give up a WORD for a week that would transform your life for the better, what would it be?”

You might like to try this for Lent.

Try this question, share your word to give up and I think you will have a sense of how Jesus connected to the boy in Luke’s story and understand Jesus’ belief that you and I can transfigure each other.

Amen

Further reading:

Writings by Jamie Coats: [www.wingedboots.com](http://www.wingedboots.com)

Give Up A Word: [www.giveupaword.org](http://www.giveupaword.org)

Society of Saint John the Evangelist: [www.ssje.org](http://www.ssje.org)

Brother, Give Us A Word: [www.ssje.org/word](http://www.ssje.org/word)

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