

TRANSFIGURED – February 23, 2020 – Pastor Donna Doult

When I was a kid, I rode the school bus back and forth to school. I came from a nice township neighborhood, and the kids that rode the bus with me were mostly all my friends. We liked riding the bus. We had a bus driver named Martha. She was fairly patient with us kids, but of course, as you all know, we were perfect children back then and didn't hassle the adults too much.

Anyway, on Fridays, Martha would let us sing. And I liked to sing back then because I was too young to know that I was not a good singer, so I was never self-conscious. I could belt out "Old Dan Tucker" just as loud as any other kid on the bus. But one of our favorite songs was "Battle Hymn of the Republic." We sang it boldly, loudly, and patriotically just as if we were marching into battle ourselves.

It never occurred to me then that we were singing a religious hymn. ¹Wikipedia tells me that the "Glory, Hallelujah" tune was a folk hymn developed during the time in the 1800's camp meetings of the south. The song links the judgment of the wicked at the end of the age with the American Civil War. But we didn't care about that.

Here's how we thought about it as kids: In that last verse that sings,
"In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me;
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free!
While God is marching on.

First off, we knew Jesus wasn't born in the lilies; he was born in a manger. Next of all, we got to use the word "bosom." Back in the 1950's that allusion to female body parts always made the boys snicker and smirk like they'd just found their big brother's Playboy magazine.

¹ Wikipedia contributors. "Battle Hymn of the Republic." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 15 Feb. 2020. Web. 17 Feb. 2020.

Then...we didn't have a clue to what "transfigured" meant anyway. It sounded frightening because in the next line, we are invited to die and march into heaven. If that's what being transfigured meant, we didn't need or want any part of that.

But I digress. It *IS* Transfiguration Sunday. Transfiguration...and now I know it means a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state.

What does Transfiguration Sunday mean to you? Probably not much. This has not been a significant event in the life of most churches. Plus, in our attempt to connect with the wider community, it seems like a hard sell to those unfamiliar with church talk. So why bother? Because we need it.

Here's why: our scripture we heard in today's gospel lesson tells us of an earth-shattering moment in time when humanity and God meet, and that takes place when they meet in the body of Jesus. Literally...in the body of Jesus. And He is transfigured.

Our scripture says, "*Jesus took Peter and the brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain.*"

So this was just another ordinary day. Why were they going up to this high mountain? Symbolically, that answer comes from our Old Testament reading today. Our Exodus scripture says, "*God said to Moses, 'Climb higher up the mountain and wait there for me; I'll give you tablets of stone, the teachings and commandments that I've written to instruct them.'* So Moses got up...and...climbed up the mountain of God."

Do you get it? It seems like when God wants to communicate directly with someone like Moses or Jesus, He reveals his messages from a mountaintop.

Our Matthew scripture continues with this, *“His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were filled with light. Then they realized that Moses and Elijah were also there in deep conversation with him.”*

So, here again, this scripture ties back to our Old Testament reading about Moses because he too, like Jesus, transformed as he saw God’s glory. Yet Jesus is no mere Moses, no ordinary representative of God on earth. How do we know that? Because while Peter was beside himself foolishly babbling and jabbering away in nervous excitement, and talking about building abodes for these three apparitions to dwell, *“a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and sounding from deep in the cloud a voice: ‘This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.’”* This is the second time we have heard God proclaim in a voice heard by others, **“THIS IS MY SON!”** Remember we heard that as John the Baptist baptized Christ.

So here we have these three disciples, Peter, James, and John. For just this brief moment in time they see who Jesus really is...really, truly is. If I would have been there, I think it would have felt like getting a glimpse into heaven. The disciples were terrified. But God comes through with one of those more than 500 times in the Bible when we are told, *“Don’t be afraid...Fear not!”*

But in that brief moment in time, they see Jesus transfigured into a beautiful spiritual state. It’s considered one of Jesus’ miracles, but not one done *BY* Jesus but *TO* Jesus.

Transfigured....think about that. Transfigured.

I am no longer the little girl who sang “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” on that school bus. I have transformed, and transfigured into the woman that shepherds you each Sunday morning in this church. It’s been a journey.

That's because there were many moments along the way that changed me from that child to the Christian woman you see before you today.

I can remember my first mountaintop experience. I thought about it when I was out at Riverview for their 9:00 service last Sunday. For our closing hymn that day we sang, "Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling." That's the hymn we were singing when I answered an alter call when I was about 12 years old, and gave my life to Christ.

I've had a few more in my life, particularly when I was working in Rwanda after the genocide there. It was then that I felt God calling me to ministry. As God commanded to Peter, James, and John to "listen" to Jesus, I did exactly that, and answered the call to ministry. Those mountaintop experiences are the moments that form and shape us.

Nowadays, we don't literally have God talking with us as they did back when Moses and Jesus walked this earth. But there are times when we can feel God intensely and personally, like He's speaking to us alone. It is SO powerful. It transforms us! We commit that will be faithful. We commit will do a devotion every day. We commit to being in church every week. We commit to service in our church.

But then again, you can come down off that mountain, and get caught up in your average, daily life, and those euphoric moments of faith slide away from you as surely as you slid down that mountain. It's like those New Year's resolutions that we've probably already broken.

We go back to "normal" life. We forget what it felt like to be with God. We forget that scripture like we heard today when God says, "*This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.*" ***Listen to him! He's trying to tell you something!***

How about you? Can you remember in your life when and if you had a mountaintop experience? When did you become the Christian you are today? When did you *transfigure* into a more beautiful, spiritual state?

Next Wednesday, February 26th is Ash Wednesday; it kicks off the season of Lent, a time when we Christians prepare for Easter by observing a period of fasting, repentance, moderation and spiritual discipline.

Ash Wednesday emphasizes two themes: our sinfulness before God and our human mortality. Our Ash Wednesday service will focus on both of themes, helping us realize that both have been triumphed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Bible says that in the last days the love of many will grow cold. Let's think about perhaps using this coming Ash Wednesday as a mountain experience for ourselves. Let's let our hearts be reignited again as we approach this holiest of seasons. Let God set your soul on fire for the love of Jesus Christ, and all He sacrificed for us. "For God so loved the world he gave his only son!" Prepare yourself to be transfigured during this Lenten season.

You know...Lent isn't just giving up donuts or candy. Lent is a season of repentance. The 40 days are set aside to really examine areas of sin in our lives that prevent us from being conformed to God's Will.

Begin by thinking about where you need to repent. Read Psalm 139, verse 23-24: *"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."*

Here's another suggestion: When was the last time you looked at the Ten Commandments? Go to Exodus 20 and scan over them. How are you doing? Should you be asking forgiveness?

Another thing to try, if you're physically capable is fasting. ²Fasting is a way of denying ourselves the excesses of life so that we might be more attuned to the Lord's voice.

² <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/spiritual-life/lent-101-honoring-the-sacrifice-of-jesus-1382259.html>

Remember Jesus fasted 40 days in the desert. Fasting is also a way of disciplining yourself, strengthening your "spiritual muscles" so to speak, so that when temptations arise in life, you are already used to saying "no" to your desires. And finally, fasting is also a way of participating, in a small way, in the sufferings of Christ and can be particularly powerful when accompanied by prayer and confession.

Why not practice serving sacrificially during Lent? You can do acts of service anywhere! Our free Community Dinner is next week. You can begin there! Cook, serve, contribute, come and sit next to one of our neighbors who come for the meal.

You can begin this journey to the Cross with us as the person sitting here today. But it is my prayer for you that this Lenten season will bring you a mountaintop experience and an opportunity to reexamine your Christian journey.

By the time Easter morning comes, and as a congregation we shout out "Christ is risen!" you may have found yourself to be transfigured too.

Amen.