

Sermon March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2014  
**Transfiguration Sunday**

This is probably the third or fourth sermon that I have preached on the Story of Christ's Transfiguration. This story, that you just heard, about Jesus going up on a mountain with three of his disciples and changing in front of them, so that his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light; we know this is a key story for the early church because there are three records of it, one each in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and a fourth reference to it in 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter. (also read for us this morning). So, it comes up a lot and demands our attention a lot. Since this is a third or fourth sermon for me, it did cross my mind to read again and maybe share with you a previously written one, but that wouldn't respect the fact that each time I come to this text it is a different time, a different context and there are different questions that I ask of it. I can only be true to that reality by talking about it in a new way this morning.

I concur with the early church. This is an important text.

However, this week, when I read it, I had a new reaction to it. This week when I read it I was angry. Having just been in Virginia at a Women doing theology conference, sponsored by Mennonite Church USA, I found that this time when I read the text, all I could see were the men in

this story – six of them. Jesus, Peter, James, John, Moses and Elijah. Now, it would be wrong to assume that when women get together as a group at theology conferences that they just get angry at men, because that's wrong. We didn't and we don't. There were a few men at the conference for various reasons and they were quite safe.

But back to this “moment” of anger that I was having with the text. Okay, I said to myself, the bible's like that and this is not the first time you've noticed or for that matter felt angry about it, but, then I read the letter of 2nd Peter, and the Believer's church commentary that goes with that text and in five pages I read references to the views of Augustine, Pelagius, Athanasius, Nestorius, Aristotle, Gregory Of Nyssa, Thomas Aquinas, Menno Simons, C. S. Lewis, Paul Ramsey, Alasdair MacIntyre, Gilbert Meilaender, Oliver O'Donovan, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Francis Schaeffer, (I got hopeful there for a moment, but no, not a woman, he's a theologian, philosopher, and Presbyterian pastor.) H. Richard Niebuhr, Karl Barth, James William McClendon Jr., Calvin, Luther, and JD. Charles.

(22 men's voices and nary a woman among them in 5 pages) I closed the book and voiced my frustration loudly to John. Okay, so when I had calmed down a bit, and tried to extend the benefit of the doubt to the

text, I thought that must simply have been a strange moment in the commentary, surely there would be women represented somewhere in the Bibliography. In the Bibliography for the Commentary on 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter and Jude of 56 authors there were no women. I looked up a bio for Marion L. Soards – just in case this might be a lone woman’s voice, but “no.” Then I went to the Bibliography for 1<sup>st</sup> Peter – a different author for that commentary and there were about 10 women represented in the Bibliography and I started to breathe more calmly.

Let me be clear, as a lead woman pastor in this TUMC community where we strive to be aware of and to respect, include and integrate the voices of women, men, youth, children, seniors and all the different ethnicities and origins represented here, I had become blind to the fact or forgotten that in all times and all places this has not been the case. What we experience here is precious. We may not always be perfect, but we value and work hard to put into practice the value we place on the diversity of our voices and we strive to hear each other and to respect what we hear.

But this “moment” of anger led me to some interesting places in connection to the text of the Transfiguration. I realized that the anger I felt about gender representation is a small part of a much bigger

concern about which I feel anger. As I have paid attention to my anger in recent months, I have begun to wonder if part of my anger is a God-given expression of grief. Grief, you might ask? What am I grieving? I'm grieving something that I think we might all be grieving without speaking it aloud, or if we do we speak it, we do so in whispers or brief conversations, because it seems too big. Are we or are we not grieving the state of our planet and its creatures and its civilizations? According to Elizabeth Kubler Ross, grief has at least five commonly recognized emotional states: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. I didn't say stages, because these emotional states were never meant to be understood in a linear fashion, but describe some of the emotional places we find ourselves when we grieve. Sometime during my lifetime, and more intensely recently I realize that I am no longer in denial that the planet is changing, in particular the climate of the planet is changing. Within this congregation there is not agreement on all the reasons why the climate is changing, but at least some acknowledgement that it is. I don't think many of us are in denial about that, but then what? We might legitimately be in any one of the states of grief on this question. I hear some people say that they are afraid. "It's scary," is a commonly heard refrain. Some say they feel depressed about it. Some are trying

very hard to do whatever they can to change human behaviour to make a difference. Some people are prophetically crying at the top of their lungs, “Wake up, people. We can’t keep raping and pillaging the earth.” and recently, I’ve been angry about it. And I’m angry because I sense we haven’t been listening. We haven’t been listening to the voices we need to hear on this question. And the text of the Transfiguration comes into my mind on exactly this point. In each record of the three gospel recordings of this story, in Matthew, Luke, Mark, this story functions as a pivotal bridge between Jesus active ministry in Galilee and his journey towards Jerusalem and the cross. Right here in the middle of three of our gospels, Jesus is transfigured, and a voice comes out of the cloud that surrounds them and says, “This is my beloved son, Listen to him.” Listen to him. If we want to know what this is all about,

If we want to move through our fear;

if we want to know what to do with our anger;

if we even want to know what to do with our struggle to

understand the religious experience described here in what we call the transfiguration,

maybe the most important thing to notice, really, is the voice of the presence of God, that says – Listen to him.

And especially if you want to know who Jesus is (because this text is about Jesus' identity) then - Listen to him.

But how do we do that? What voices should we listen to that help us to hear Jesus' voice? The context of the transfiguration passage helps us with that. Just before this passage, Jesus asked the disciples, the identity question, "Who do people say that I am?" And Peter responds, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God and as the story is told in Matthew, Jesus approves of that response by awarding Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven and telling him that upon this rock he will build his church. Then Jesus explains what the true nature of his identity as Messiah really means. He tells his followers that he will suffer and die a cruel death and that after three days he will be raised: suffering, death and glory. When Peter rails in anger against this possibility, Jesus puts him in his place by telling the Satan, to get behind him. Jesus then tells his followers to take up their cross and follow him. And shortly after that Jesus ascends the mountain with three of his followers and what the disciples witness there frightens them – an unexpected experience of God's presence and the glorification of Jesus. There they are on a hill where the presence of Moses and Elijah brings to mind the Mount Sinai of the law and the prophets, and this same hill prefigures the hill of

Calvary where Jesus will die between two thieves. In this way glory is overlaid upon suffering and suffering is overlaid upon glory. To follow Jesus into Glory and resurrection means first to follow him into suffering. This remarkable narrative bridge functions not only as a bridge within the gospels, in the centre of the story where identity and suffering and glory are all combined, but also forms a bridge within the broader canon of the Bible as well. On that same hill can be seen the law, the prophets (through Elijah and Moses of course) and the foolishness of God's wisdom – where it becomes clear that the suffering and glorification of Jesus are inextricably linked. And if we are even to begin to know what all of this means at its deepest level we have to listen to him. When the vision fades, the first thing Jesus says to his disciples is – “Rise and have no fear,” And so when they rise, and descend the mountain the disciples continue to observe and listen to him as he casts out demons and tells them that the greatest in the kingdom will be as a child.

What does that mean for us, here and now?

It means listening to Jesus where Jesus lives. And where does Jesus live? Jesus is anywhere where Jesus' glory and suffering are inseparable, where demons are cast out, where people have taken

up their crosses and followed Jesus and where the least powerful on the planet, the “children” of the planet are using their voices.

Are we listening? Can we hear?

With good reason, I closed the commentary. That is not where I am currently able to hear Jesus’ voice. I’m currently hearing Jesus voice in this month’s Sojourners magazine, where there is an article, entitled Reclaiming the Word, Indigenous theologians find redemptive power in the same gospel used by Western missionaries to divide and conquer and they do so by making four major shifts, first, away from dualism, second, emphasizing Genesis 1 and 2 – “creation” rather than Genesis 3 – “the fall” as the starting point, third, redefining what is meant by spiritual and fourth, reclaiming the significance and power of story without desecrating stories by dissecting them. If you are looking for stories of the voice of Jesus on the margins, where suffering and resurrection life are intermingled, this magazine is one very good place to look.

I’m also currently hearing the voice of Jesus in the diversity of voices in the book Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: a conversation on creation, land, justice and life together. This book places indigenous and settler voices side by side and the conversation by its very nature witnesses to

suffering, hope and bridge-building as together these authors listen to each other, the travail of creation and speak from that place. Not all of these voices are easy to hear, but who said that Jesus was easy to hear. and I heard Jesus' voice last week when Sarah Augustine, a woman who waxed eloquently on the theological themes of creation and justice told me in no uncertain terms when I spoke with her afterwards that she is not a theologian she is an activist. (I would contend she's both) – but she told the story of why she is an activist. What is now an all-consuming campaign started quietly nine years ago, with a routine U.S. government contract for environmental toxicologist Dan Peplow, a long-time member of [Seattle Mennonite Church](#).

The [U.S. Embassy in Suriname](#) (Suriname is a small country on the edge of the South American Rainforest just north of Brazil) hired Peplow early in 2004, to test some folks living in rural parts of that country to see if gold mining might be having an impact on their health profiles.

Peplow, who holds a PhD in ecotoxicology, was shocked by the results of testing the blood, hair and urine of 262 villagers living along a major river, the Tapanahony. Every single one of them had been poisoned by methylmercury, the chemical used to separate gold from water and

sediment.

Peplow knew that methylmercury poisoning typically can be traced to eating contaminated fish. Its effects are irreversible, causing impaired vision, hearing, speech and muscle control, and birth defects.

Even more shocking to Peplow was the discovery that U.S. officials had no intention of warning the Wayana about the dangers they were facing and the likely source of the problem – river water contaminated by gold mining, often by North American businesses.

Peplow ended up teaming up with Sarah Augustine, from Seattle Mennonite, to secure interpreters and transportation to return to the Amazon rainforest and give the Wayana the results of the tests. Sarah herself has native American roots. She tells that when they were gathered with the Wayana community in Suriname and had explained the toxicology results to them and the reasons for the poisoning (all through interpreters of course) an elderly woman, clearly a leader in the community came up to her through the crowd of men and interpreters and pointed at her and said, “You are going to fight for us?” and Sarah who says when she retells it, “what was I supposed to say to that?” She

responded in the only way she felt she could. She grabbed that cross being offered her in that moment and said “yes.”<sup>1</sup>

The elderly Wayana woman lives a life of both suffering and hope and through Sarah we hear her and when we hear her, we hear Jesus.

And so, am I still angry? Yes, sometimes I am. And sometimes I cry about it all; a planet and its creatures and its civilization in pain, and one day soon, we will have a service of lament, so that if you share this grief, we can move through it together in a liturgically valuable way.

The story of the transfiguration and its context remind us that the suffering and the resurrection glory of Jesus are inseparable and anywhere you hear the voice of life-giving hope amid suffering, you hear the voice of Jesus so listen to him. Rise and have no fear. When we start next week on our journey through Lent towards Easter, Jesus will show us the way.

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<sup>1</sup>A brief biography of Sarah Augustine.  
<http://emu.edu/now/news/2013/02/seattle-mennonite-couple-lead-fight-to-prevent-extinction-of-indigenous-people-due-to-mercury-poisoning/>