

“Transfiguration, Veiled Minds, and Loving Your Mother” by Elizabeth Gelfeld

February 11, 2013



The Feast of the Transfiguration

Most Sundays we hear the liturgist say something like this: We at Seekers believe that all of us hear the Word of God and from time to time some are called to share that Word in the sermon. I confess to you that that is not exactly how I happen to be standing here today. It was about three months ago that I volunteered to preach on this day – but it wasn't because I heard a Word then that I was called to share with you today. It was because I learned that this weekend there would be a National Preach-In on Global Warming, organized by the advocacy group Interfaith Power & Light, a group in which Seekers Church participates. Because global climate change is something I care deeply about, I signed on hoping that, by today, the Holy One would give me a word to share with you.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart find favor in your Heart, O my Beloved, my strength and my joy!

The nationwide preach-in this weekend is interfaith, which means that whoever thought this up was not so concerned about

which scripture lessons would be read in any particular church or synagogue or mosque or temple or other house of worship. In fact, the theme of the preach-in, on this weekend before Valentine's Day, is Love Creation.

But for us, as we follow a Christian lectionary cycle of scripture readings, today is the Sunday for hearing the story of Jesus' Transfiguration. Today is final Sunday of the season following Epiphany, and this coming Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we will enter the season of Lent.

The Transfiguration is a turning point. For the past four weeks we have been hearing stories that, taken together, tell us much about who Jesus is. We began with his Baptism in the river Jordan, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove and a voice from the sky spoke to him: "You are my Own." Next there was the first of his signs, changing water to wine at the wedding in Cana. Then, in the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown, he read from the prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." When he finished reading, with the eyes of all in the synagogue fixed on him, he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And, last Sunday, we learned what happened next: As Jesus continued to teach, his audience, who moments before had been hanging on his every word, turned on a dime into an enraged mob, ready to throw him off a cliff.

So today we come to the Transfiguration. This story, like the Baptism, occurs in all three synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – and is possibly referred to at the beginning of John: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory." In the synoptic Gospel accounts, Jesus climbs a mountain with Peter, James, and John. On the mountaintop Jesus begins to shine with bright rays of light. Then Moses and Elijah appear next to him and he speaks with them. And then, the heaven opens and the Holy One speaks.

When Jesus was baptized, the skies opened and the voice of the Holy One spoke to him: "You are my Own, my Beloved. On you my favor rests." Now, at the Transfiguration, the voice coming from within a cloud addresses the three disciples, interrupting Peter as he's babbling on about building tents: "This is my Own, my Chosen One. Listen to him!"

A mountaintop is one of those thin places – places where the veil between humanity and the Holy is thin and more easily penetrated. My 18-year-old son, who most days is an atheist, has experienced the Holy after climbing to the peak of a mountain. From a mountaintop you get a whole different perspective. But it comes at a cost: It takes a lot of effort to climb a mountain – it is difficult and sometimes scary. And then, when you finally reach the summit, you know why you took the risk. On the mountaintop the air is clearer. You hear the whoosh of the wind. You look out and see "the world . . . charged with the grandeur of God" – in the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The mountaintop is a thin place, and on this mountain of the Transfiguration Peter, James, and John see Jesus glorified. Human nature meets the Holy One, and Jesus is the connecting point, the bridge between heaven and earth.

"Listen to him." Listen to the one who said, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

What might that mean for us, now, in terms of the challenges we face?

Hear now the words of a prophet of our own time: "The . . . immediate concern for us is that the vision of humanness and humaneness we so treasure in the Gospel is being forgotten.

These values are not found even within the Body of Christ. . . . Because of our economy, its presuppositions, and our heightening consumer mentality, we are on the brink of losing the home that God has given us. . . . We are . . . coming to the point where nature will no longer be able to support our addiction to satiation.”

This prophet is Gordon Cosby, founder of the Church of the Saviour, in which tradition Seekers Church was founded and continues to minister. The words I just quoted are from a sermon Gordon preached in 1990, titled “How Much Is Enough?” Immediately after the passage I just read, he quoted from the theologian Matthew Fox, who recounted in his book *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* a vivid dream, the essence of which was, “Your mother is dying.” Fox developed the dream in his book in sections with titles including “Mother Earth Is Dying” “Wisdom Is Dying,” “Mother Church Is Dying.” The last section was titled “Our Mother Is Dying, But Not Dead.” And Gordon went on to say, “Therein lies the hope. But unless the dying dimension is understood, there is no hope.”

We are coming to understand the dying dimension of our Mother Earth. Record wildfires, drought, heat, Arctic ice melt. And, what does the blizzard in the Northeast this weekend have to do with global warming? Climate change doesn't cause storms, but it does make them stronger. Unusually warm ocean surface temperatures put more moisture and more energy into storms, and we see the results in Superstorm Sandy and, now, a record-breaking blizzard. These disasters are becoming a normal pattern in our weather.

It is not my task today to beat you over the head with alarming facts; you can take care of that on your own. What I want to do instead is call your attention to some of the signs of hope. Yes, the situation is dire and we have to act quickly, but our Mother Earth is not dead and many people are working hard and risking much to save her, and I believe the tide is turning.

Here are three of the signs of hope that I see.

One: During a two-week period of August 2011, 1,253 of us sat down in front of the White House and were arrested in order to stop the Keystone XL oil pipeline, which would carry crude oil from the tar sands of Alberta, Canada, to the refineries of Texas. Later that year, 12,000 people came to Washington and encircled the White House. At that time, the pipeline was considered a done deal, and we could only hope to raise the visibility of an issue that was on hardly anyone's radar. And the Tar Sands Action worked – we beat the odds and convinced President Obama to take a year to study it.

Two: There is a movement growing now among students across the country calling for their universities to pull their endowment funds out of the fossil fuel industries. There are now more than 250 campuses involved, including Harvard and Cornell. Why are they doing this? Because, the main sources of the greenhouse gases that are trapping heat in our atmosphere are the extraction and burning of coal, oil, and natural gas. Fossil fuel companies also fund misinformation campaigns, and they lobby aggressively against reasonable climate legislation. This industry does not act justly. They do not deserve our money.

About twenty years ago, South Africa's apartheid regime was toppled, in part because more than 150 colleges and 90 U.S. cities committed to economic sanctions against the country. During the South African divestment movement, many companies joined in, just to avoid being labeled as discriminatory. Wouldn't it be incredible if the fossil fuel industry had a similar stigma? "Oh, you fund fossil fuel extraction? I'll take my business elsewhere."

And here's my third reason for hope: In 1963, during the African-American Civil Rights Movement, Gordon Cosby wrote a reflection calling on the church to do something about a place in Washington, D.C., called Junior Village, an institution

holding almost 900 children who were abandoned or abused. While he commended the hard-working volunteers and staff who were doing their best to care for these children, Gordon declared that children belong in families, not in an institution, and he said, "The aim of this mission is to free the children within a year. . . . Why should the church always come in with too little too late?"

It took more than a year, but in 1973 Junior Village was closed. Every child had a home. All 900 of them. Muriel Lipp was involved in this mission, and the creation of For Love of Children, an organization that still serves, and I asked her, how did you do it? She told me about the small group she was part of, which took responsibility for a family with eight or nine children, meeting with the parents weekly, struggling with them, and persisting. It was not easy. Muriel told me, "We made so many mistakes you wouldn't believe it." She also said, "We got better as we went along." Those children were restored to their family, and this same process was repeated in many, many other small groups like Muriel's.

As soon as Jesus comes down from the mountain, a man begs him to heal his son, his only child, who has a terrible demon. Mark gives us the story in more detail, telling that Jesus addresses the demon, saying, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him and never return!" It is also in Mark's telling of this story that the father of the boy says, "If you can do anything, help us!" Jesus replies, " 'If you can?' Everything is possible to those who believe!" And the child's father says, "I do believe. Help my unbelief!"

The demonic structures of our society are not easy to cast out – especially the ones that keep us from speaking and hearing. Casting them out has never been easy. But it has been done. Junior Village was closed. South Africa held multiracial, democratic elections in 1994. And, by the way, on this day, February 10th, 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from a South

African prison where he had been for 27 years. In 1994 he was elected as the country's first black president. Mandela and Gordon Cosby are about the same age, 94.

Right before the Transfiguration story, in all three of the Gospels, Jesus tells his disciples that he will suffer, die, and be raised on the third day. And, after coming down from the mountain and casting the demon out of the boy, Jesus repeats this message. Luke further emphasizes it by telling us that Moses and Elijah, appearing in glory with Jesus, are discussing with him this prophecy that Jesus was about to fulfill in Jerusalem. The Transfiguration can only be understood in light of the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Indeed, Peter, James, and John still don't get it.

In our reading from 2 Corinthians, Paul says about the Israelites: "Their minds had been dulled . . . a veil covers their understanding" and only in Christ can the veil be removed. The Transfiguration story is about seeing things as they really are, removing the veil, and, as St. Paul tells us, "with unveiled faces reflecting God's glory, growing brighter and brighter as we are being transformed into the image we reflect."

The Transfiguration is a turning point. After that, Jesus sets out on the road to Jerusalem.

The voice of the Holy One says, "Listen to him." Jesus tells us that the road ahead leads to suffering and death. No one on this road gets to avoid suffering and death. Caring about climate change enough to do something about it means that we have to confront our "addiction to satiation," in Gordon Cosby's words. "Satiation" means being fully satisfied, or, getting what we want. What would it mean for us to break that addiction?

To do justice to people in other parts of the world who are now losing their homes and livelihoods to the effects of

climate change, to do justice to our children and their children to the seventh generation, to do justice to plant and animal species, like the golden frog, that cannot adapt fast enough to survive – what does that mean for us?

At the end of 1990 sermon titled “How Much Is Enough,” Gordon grapples with the question of what our real needs are versus what our planet can sustain, and he notes that our needs change depending upon our degree of connectedness in three areas: our connectedness to God, the depth of our connectedness with people, and our connectedness to the earth and to the universe. About this Gordon says, “we have become pathological. We have separated ourselves from our planet, and this is suicidal.” Gordon does not mince words.

He quotes the Native American Chief Seattle, who in 1854 said this:

Every part of the country is sacred to my people. Every glittering pine needle, every sandy beach, all the mists in the dark forests, the rocky hills, the gentle meadows, the bodily warmth of ponies and of people – they all belong to the same family.

And Gordon then says, “As I deepen my connectedness with my natural habitat I don’t want to assault it any longer. Whatever the personal cost, I want to live in natural harmony with it. I want to give to it, and I want to draw from its wisdom, its beauty, and its grandeur. This is the attitude we need to acquire as we work with the question, How much is enough?”