

TRANSFORMATION, A CONTINUOUS PROCESS OF CHANGE

GOSPEL: LUKE 9: 28-36[37-43]

Good morning. I am Rev. Theodore Moore, Deacon at Grace Church, Plainfield, NJ. I bring you greetings from Rev. Carolyn Eklund, our rector.

It is a pleasure to be here to worship with you and to celebrate Black Heritage Sunday with you this morning. This is a day when we remember Absalom Jones . . . who was the first Black Episcopal priest . . . as well as the numerous other pioneers who fought for equality, justice and peace. Today we also will be re-witnessing and discussing the Transfiguration of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I have chosen as the title of my sermon today *Transformation, A Continuous Process of Change*. According to Webster's dictionary, the word transfigure means to give a new and typically exalted or spiritual appearance: to **transform** outwardly and usually for the better.

The dictionary defines the verb **transform** as the act of changing in composition or structure. To transform is to change the outward form or appearance. It is a change in character or condition. A conversion.

Transfiguration and transformation both come from the same Middle English root meaning "to change shape." The key word in each definition is CHANGE and this change is usually a positive transformation or, for our purposes today, a revelation.

In Luke's Gospel immediately prior to today's lesson, Jesus asked the disciples two questions, "Who do the **crowds** say that I am?" The disciples answered that people were saying that Jesus was John the Baptist, Elijah and other prophets. Jesus then asks, "But who do **you** say that I am? Peter answered, 'The Messiah or Christ of God'. Jesus then sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone about this discussion.

Listen again to the account of the Transfiguration and the subsequent reactions of his disciples. "About eight days after Peter acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem."

This encounter with God on the mountaintop symbolizes those rare occasions in our lives when we have dramatic or life changing . . . transformative . . . encounters with the Holy Spirit. Think back to a time in your life when you were in danger or were facing an impossible task and . . . miraculously . . . you avoided disaster or were able to meet the challenge.

David the psalm-writer is reported to have experienced this sense of safety during an attack. In the middle of fear and suffering, he found God as his hope and refuge. “For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.”

Have any of you had a unique transformational moment when God’s presence has been overwhelming? Did it change your life? It is during those times that we realize that God loves us and is with us even when we think that we have been forgotten. These kinds of incidents give us renewed faith in God. We are all flawed and vulnerable human beings, destined to face trials and tribulations. But remember, we are also uniquely created by God and equipped for the challenges and special tasks of this life. We must listen, pray and believe!

How did the disciples react to their experience on the mountain? How do we react to our experiences, whatever they may be? Luke records the following about the disciples: “Peter and his companions were weighted down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, ‘Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah’. A cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’

My Christian friends this is God’s message to the disciples and to us. Listen to the call of God to us during our own transformative moments. Listen to the messages of our Lord Jesus Christ. During this momentous occasion, the disciples were struggling with sleep and almost missed it all! Before you begin to criticize them, remember that these were ordinary men, mostly fishermen called into an extraordinary situation.

It is not surprising that Peter is once again the one who speaks up and makes a statement: “Master it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

Do you think that the message God delivered through the Transfiguration suggested that the thing to do was to build three dwellings? Was this Peter's half-awake response to an awesome event? Sometimes we all miss the essential meaning of God's message. God wants us to examine and test what we think the main messages are for us and what we should do or change. Since the primary mission for us as Episcopalians is contained in our baptismal covenant then we must pray reverently about that covenant, especially the last two questions on page 305: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? Are we honoring our baptismal covenant? If not it may be time for a change.

As we all know, February is the month when we remember African Americans who have passed before us and left examples of their struggles for justice, peace and dignity. I am thinking now of Absalom Jones. He and Richard Allen were the first African Americans to receive formal ordination in any denomination in America. Both men had been active members of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. But they left the church in protest when white members of the church restricted them and all other black members of the church to the balcony. This came despite the fact that they had provided months of faithful service to the church, worshipping side by side with white members.

Out of their deep disappointment, rejection and humiliation, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen and the other African American church members walked out of St. George's resolved to form their own church.

Absalom Jones conferred with William White, Episcopal Bishop of Philadelphia, who agreed to accept the group as an Episcopal parish. On July 17, 1794, the African Church – later to be known as the Episcopal Church of St. Thomas – opened its doors at Fifth and Adelphi Streets in Philadelphia. Absalom Jones served as a lay reader and after a period of study was ordained a deacon in 1795, and a priest and rector in 1804. Today, the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas continues to flourish as an open, Christ-centered community of faith. Richard Allen, who preferred to continue to worship in the Methodist tradition, went on to found the African Methodist Episcopal Church, also in Philadelphia, on July 29, 1794. It was the first independent black denomination in the United States.

This month we also honor those who spent their lives being sold like farm animals and who endured the indignity and pain of separation from family and suffered other cruel and inhuman treatment. Among the degraded, hated and oppressed

black people in America there always have been leaders and helpers who fought against slavery, segregation and discrimination such as Frederick Douglass, David Walker, Nat Turner, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and others who had the courage to speak out and take audacious steps toward freedom and true democracy.

I am also thinking today of those white friends who fought hard and long to bring about the abolition of slavery. Radical abolitionism was partly fueled by the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening. This Awakening was a powerful evangelical religious movement. It arose to impart spiritual direction by stressing the moral imperative to end sinful practices. It also emphasized individual responsibility to uphold God's will in society. This movement prompted many people to advocate for emancipation on religious grounds. Preachers like Lyman Beecher, Nathaniel Taylor and Charles G. Finney led massive religious revivals in the 1820s that gave a major impetus to the later prominence of abolitionism as well as to such other reforming crusades as temperance, pacifism and women's rights.

Abolitionist ideas became increasingly prominent in Northern churches and politics beginning in the 1830s, which contributed to the regional animosity between North and South leading up to the Civil War. Among those remembered today are Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Beecher Stowe, John Brown, Wendell Phillips, Gerrit Smith, Edmund Quincy, Angelina Grimke, Theodore D. Weld, Arthur and Lewis Tappan, Elizur Wright Jr., John Brown, William Lloyd Garrison and Thaddeus Stevens.

So where are we today in the battle to eliminate the remnants of slavery, prejudice, racism and discrimination? What is our ministry in today's society, a society which often seems aloof and detached from the lingering effects of previous injustices? How loud are our voices in the struggle over assault weapons? Why does our society have the highest prison population among the highly developed civilizations? Why do African American and Latino young men comprise the largest percentage of the prison population? Is this another form of slavery? Are living and working conditions for migrant workers equal to standards of decency and legality? If not, this needs to change.

I invite you to listen again to a part of the second lesson that was read today: 2 Corinthians 4: 1-2. "Therefore since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God."

So that you will not leave here this morning thinking that my only message is one of a reprimand for work undone, I want to acknowledge the work done at Christ Church with the Interfaith Homeless Shelter, the Christ Church Food Pantry, assistance for home bound members and The Hall Education Fund for the education of poor and disadvantaged and other outreach efforts including this celebration of Black Heritage.

The take-home messages this Sunday are as follows:

God loves us and has made each and every one of us for himself with special unique and valuable talents.

1. God wants us to discern & use these talents in specific and meaningful ways as directed by his Son Jesus Christ. Listen to Him!
2. Keep awake and alert for our enemy, the devil is busy tempting us and offering us the world as the answer to all our wants and needs!
3. Romans 12: 2; “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God- what is good and acceptable and perfect.”
4. As Christians, priests, deacons and ministers we are sent out to love God and to love one another, and we are sent to live out our Baptismal Covenant everyday of our lives.

Amen