

# “Sacred spaces, thin places”

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 11 February 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

## Transfiguration B

2 Kings 2: 1-12; Mark 9: 2-9; Contemporary Reading:  
David Whyte, “The opening of eyes”

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Gatherings” tab

---

Once a year, on the last Sunday before Lent, we observe “Transfiguration Sunday”, and we tell this story. The story of Jesus going up to the top of the mountain with his three disciples, Peter, James, and John. And when he got to the top, he was “*transfigured*”, and his face “*shone like the sun*” and his clothes were “*dazzling white*”. And then, Moses and Elijah, two leaders of God’s people from centuries earlier, appear too. And, as at his Baptism - the story that we told at the beginning of the season of Epiphany - God’s voice says, “*this is my Beloved, my Own...listen to him.*”

Transfiguration is not a word that is used in everyday speech. Until a few years ago, most people who do not attend church had quite likely never heard of it. But J K Rowling, author of the Harry Potter books, changed that.

Harry Potter fans know about transfiguration.

Transfiguration is a subject taught at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

It is taught by “Professor McGonagall”. In her class students learn to change one thing into another, like a mouse into a tea cup.

It’s known to be a difficult class at Hogwarts, since there are so many variables – the mass of the object, the strength of the wand, and the witch or wizard’s powers of concentration...

Students at Hogwarts start slowly, first changing things like matches into needles. Gradually they work their way up to transfigure larger objects: a chair to a cat, a teapot to a tortoise.

Professor McGonagall was so skilled at this that she could transfigure herself from a human to a cat and back again.

Transfiguration in Harry Potter is magic.

So, is what happened to Jesus on the mountain ‘magic’?

Did he learn some sort of a spell that allowed him to suddenly change his appearance – and that of his face and his clothes?

I don't think it was magic. I don't think it was a trick.

But I do think that those who saw it, whatever it was, might have described it as magical – I think they knew it was beyond rational explanation. (So I will not try to rationally explain it.)

Peter, James, and John saw a spectacular vision. It was a brief moment when the light of God was truly visible in Jesus; it was a moment when God shone through, in all of God's glory.

They heard the voice of God proclaim, *"This is the Beloved, my Own; listen to him!"*

But as quickly as the vision came, it is gone. They look up, and Moses and Elijah have vanished, the voice is silent, and Jesus' face and clothes are not shining any more.

Like many God moments, it was over. So quickly.

In Tennessee Williams play, "A Streetcar Named Desire" the main character, Blanche, has a strange line. In a moment of tense, complex intimacy, of an illicit yet life-giving kiss, she says *"Sometimes – there's God – so quickly."*

Sacred space, thin places, God moments come quickly. We get a momentary glimpse of the Divine looking at a spectacular sunset or a dramatic storm – as some of us experienced last night! While listening to music that touches our soul, or in the face of a young child, the touch of a lover, or the resilient eyes of a refugee beginning again in a new land. We get a glimpse – but as quickly as it comes, it goes away.

*"Sometimes – there's God – so quickly."* Oh, so quickly...and it's gone.

All the great religions of the world emerged out of encounters with the Divine that radically changed the lives of those who encountered the Holy. They were transfigured, and their experiences gave birth to the great faith traditions that we value today.

The moment of insight and awareness that we associate with transfiguration only has power because, while the event may be fleeting, its impact is not. What happens, in the encounter with the Holy, shapes people, and leads them to live differently because of the power that they have experienced and the reality that they have glimpsed.

So Transfiguration has both dramatic and gradual elements. And the idea of transfiguration as a process raises the question for us: *"What does transfigured life look like for us?"* Today's readings are about glory and transformation. They invite us to see ourselves, our world, and our lives, as "thin places," transparent to the divine. They invite us to imagine ourselves as transfigured persons, "thin" and translucent to the Divine.

The transfiguration of Jesus in this story occurs in a "thin place." Historically mountaintops have been seen as places of revelation. For the ancients, they were literally, figuratively, and spiritually closer to heaven than the valleys, or the flatlands.

Thin places are places of perspective and vision of the far horizons of the Divine.

The disciples are invited, in this moment, to see the fullness of Jesus' humanity, for full humanity is what divinity is. On the mountaintop, divine light shines through the cells that make up his body - as well as his soul.

While we seldom see the inner light of our companions, the story of Jesus' transfiguration invites us to look for "more" in ourselves, in other people and creatures, and in the earth. Indigenous Australians know that there is Spirit life in the red earth and the red rocks of Australia, that there are revelations to be found in the commonplace.

The whole earth is filled with God's glory. In the words of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, "*the world is charged with the grandeur of God.*"

David Whyte, in the poem that we heard, heard the voice of the world speaking out:

*I knew then, as I had before  
life is no passing memory of what has been  
nor the remaining pages in a great book  
waiting to be read.*

*It is the opening of eyes long closed.  
It is the vision of far off things  
seen for the silence they hold.*

Perhaps it might be helpful if, rather than thinking about the transfiguration of Jesus as something weird, something magical even, that happened to him and to the disciples, it might be helpful if we were to think about transfiguration as a process and as a practice.

Rather than telling a story in which Jesus is so totally other than us, we might hear this story as an invitation into our own transfigured lives.

The Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition has perhaps the most robust conception of what it may mean to practice transfiguration. They call this practice "theosis" or "divinization."

To begin to reflect on what practicing Transfiguration could mean and look like today, I thought about Marianne Williamson's book *A Return to Love*, in which she writes:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*

One of my central faith convictions is that following the way of Jesus is more important than admiring Jesus, or believing stuff about him.

Williamson's words illuminate a way, not only of being awe-struck by a mountaintop experience 2,000 years ago, but also of following Jesus — along with all the women and men of faith before him and those that came after him — in a practice of transfiguration: the practice of allowing the light of God's love to shine through us.

I do not think it is a coincidence that Moses, Elijah, and Jesus all experienced God on a mountaintop. Withdrawing to a space that is sacred to us, to a thin place, is a life-giving practice. You probably have places in or near Sydney where experience that “something more.” Places you go, either on your own, or with a close friend or group of friends.

North Head, on the other side of the Harbour is my Sydney thin place. In New Zealand it is the land of Central Otago, around Lake Wanaka and the Lindis Pass. In the USA, the wilderness of Ghost Ranch, in New Mexico that is my holy land; but also in some peculiar way, so is Manhattan with its diversity, and its energy and its madness.

So, when we pray and meditate, go on a retreat, gather together to worship, or simply open our eyes and our hearts to life around us in the city, we are beginning to practise transfiguration.

Such contemplative practices are ways of letting go of our ego, the masks that we wear, our busyness, and our distractions. These practices of prayer, presence, and worship, open us from our isolation to connect us with the Divine Presence – and also to one another and to the sacred earth.

We each reflect different aspects of the image of God, and practicing transfiguration allows God’s image to shine more brightly through us in all our uniqueness and diversity.

However, an experience of Transfiguration is no guarantee that our troubles will stay away. Just as Elisha had to deal with the loss of Elijah and the responsibilities of the mantle and the blessing, Jesus, after the mountaintop Transfiguration, still had to turn his face toward Jerusalem, where his Civil Disobedience, his Religious Disobedience, his Resistance at Passover, against the powers that be, led to his tragic martyrdom at the hands of the Roman Empire. And the disciples were likewise were unable to avoid this drama of suffering.

In the midst of personal and political realities, contemplative practices open us. That’s what the practice of transfiguration looks like: if we can make it happen in our lives, regularly carving out some time and space in our busy lives simply to be with God and to allow God to be present with us, our lives may be transfigured and transformed.

We hear again, this ancient story on the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, which is also the last Sunday before Lent – which happens on this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday.

Like Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, we are poised to begin the journey to the Cross. Like him we need spiritual resources to make that journey.

As the season of Epiphany, of “showing forth” comes to an end, we reflect on this powerful story, and we are reminded that Jesus is the ultimate epiphany, our unique revelation of God among us in human form.

In Jesus, as Christians, we believe that we see the most complete human expression of Divine Presence.

With that insight we conclude Epiphany and open ourselves to the challenge of Lent.

Blessed be.