

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS  
The Second Sunday in the Season of Lent

We know today’s Gospel, the story of the miraculous Transfiguration of Jesus, is just one station pause on our Lenten road. Last week we heard the disciple Matthew tell of another “mountain top story.”

On that mountain, Satan offered Jesus victory over enemies, all manner of power, prestige, and rewards-- if only-- he would bow down to Satan as ruling lord. But, Jesus did not surrender his authority, will, or mission.

And today, in our second reading, Timothy tells us to witness for God without fear or shame, for similar temptations will surely come to us. He calls us “to a holy life,” asking that we join him “in suffering for the gospel” in the nitty-gritty history of today. Timothy pulls no punches: the holy life is not about ease and comfort, command and control. It is a life of radical humility, and extending the hand of mercy and justice.

Apparently, Paul Lehmann was inspired by the Transfiguration Story, because he titled his 1974 book, *The Transfiguration of Politics*. Lehmann warned that all human revolutions against oppression run the danger of corrupting themselves when using political power. Too often they have no reconstructive leadership, and unleash great chaos and loss of innocent human life.

But – Lehmann saw Hope in the Transfiguration Story we read today. He believed -- **“the saving story of Jesus”** (God’s incarnating guiding Presence among us) **could transform the use of power in history** to advance the cause of compassion and justice. He knew that in history, there **were** individuals who did reject Satan and his false values. He believed that such people, when they experienced the Saving Story of Jesus through the Holy Spirit, came down from the mountain and witnessed to the transforming revolution of God’s Love. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was gripped by that transfigured revolutionary love. He told us he had been to the mountain, and seen God’s Glory.

Now, Father Daley knew I recently finished a book on local history that highlights local people who rejected the easy path of tolerating the suffering of others in the 1830s. These obscure clergy, farmers, merchants, lawyers, teachers, store-owners, as well as ladies of Fayetteville, began “agitating” the moral conscience of neighbors and church members into working to end slavery in this country. These “agitators” lived in Manlius, Fayetteville, DeWitt, High Bridge and Pompey. They were the very early organizers and leaders of the anti-slavery movement in Onondaga County.

In the struggle for justice, historian Howard Zinn noted how important it was that some people “stepped out of line” (and out of silence), despite being “beset by fear,” to do even one small step to advance justice.

In the Town of Manlius, there were ordinary people inspired by a strong biblical faith who organized themselves to work for emancipation almost thirty years before President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Some acted through their church membership and questioned a lax social conscience in their leaders. When their efforts failed to gain support for a public declaration against slavery, a few of them seceded, rather than be complicit in the sin of slavery.

Some responded to an opportunity to go listen to the word of God preached during recurring revivals. Today we would have called these events, retreats or prayer meetings, but in the early 1800s they were known by Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists as “revivals” and “protracted meetings.”

Such revivals went on for many days, often over a week. Many people attended them. They were quite lively events. People begged forgiveness, asked for prayers, moaned out loud, pleading to be saved from their pride and selfishness. They sang and shouted their praise and gratitude. Such displays of enthusiasm disturbed academic-trained clergymen. They, and many middle-class church members considered them common, and low-brow.

I confess I had a prejudice against such “religious enthusiasm” and outward displays of emotion during the 1970s. Better -- I thought -- to keep the lid on, to hem emotion in neatly, maybe to allow a subtle refined smile. I had religion in the head ----but not much spilling joyously and spontaneously out of my heart.

Then, in the late 1970s, I was part of a group of women religious who partnered with sugar cane plantation workers to help build their “sweat equity” homes in southern Louisiana. The more hours logged in, the faster families could move in. The second summer when we returned, however, pressure was put on the sisters to revoke the invitation to use their residency. I know those sisters must have been greatly pained.

The people who immediately offered us a place to stay, a trailer to live in nearby, were a group of charismatic Catholics in Morgan City. They were people of open heart who lived a generous spontaneity. They were Catholics aligned to the Gospel message in the face of disapproval.

I’ve never forgotten that. Nor the sweet potato pie offered me by an elderly lady on the porch of her shotgun house on Oxford Plantation, like it was Communion. And it was.

Nor have I forgotten the gracious, incarnate love of sugar cane workers and their families praying with jubilant hope-- with fans, hands, feet and song-- in their plantation churches as if the Saving Love of Jesus were already here. And it was.

I remained in Louisiana for two years. In a way, it was my mountain-top experience.

Dr. Wayne Dyer, the popular personal development author, titled his new book, I CAN SEE CLEARLY NOW. When I look back on my life adventures, as this author did, clarity broke through my ignorance and pride - because of such grace-filled experiences in southern Louisiana.

And so, when I started my research here in Manlius, this New Sight allowed me to see how religious convictions played such a prominent role in the lives of several local abolitionists, who kick-started, and sustained the earliest days of anti-slavery movement in this county.

I researched the people, revivals and protracted meetings that were held in Jamesville, Manlius, Fayetteville, High Bridge, and the surrounding countryside. People set aside their work day activities to hear what God asked of them. Of course, some were just curious, or bored. But some were led mysteriously by an aching sense of dissatisfaction, and of these, some were gripped by the power of God's Holy Spirit. And when they came back to town, and into their churches and associations, they found others like-wise committed in God's work to set captives free.

In my book there are many conflicts, but also great sacrifice and courage. Those who stood their ground in pursuit of emancipation were called fanatics and agitators, and blamed for the meddling in things that don't, or shouldn't concern them, for causing upset and disharmony.

One scene particularly reminds me of the Transfiguration, when Peter, James and John came down from the mountain and faced the fears and conflicts of those ruling authorities as Jesus made his way to Jerusalem.

It started on October 21, 1835, when a crowd of delegates had come from across the state to Utica to form a state organization to plan actions that would emancipate slaves in the nation. There were eight men from Fayetteville and Manlius who attended, and several from Pompey. Then some angry Utica citizens forced the revoking of their constitutional right to assemble and speak in a public building. Delegates, however, gained permission to use the Bleecker Street Presbyterian Church. They started their business meeting and were drafting their constitution when the loud and angry voices of a mob swelled outside, and many finally breaking through demanding the meeting to stop, seeking to grab hold of the documents being written.

It was tense. Delegates dispersed. Gerrit Smith of Peterboro was so shocked by this mob behavior, that he invited all the delegates still in the city, to come to his home in Peterboro so they could finish their business.

And by various means of transport, carriage and packet boats, about two hundred of them got as far as Canastota. In the early morning hours they walked up the hill, praying and singing songs of encouragement, as they processed their way for ten miles to the hamlet center of Peterboro.

Along the way, as some doors opened in farm houses in the early dawn to the sounds of this straggling but merry band, James C. Jackson called back to them:

“Come put on a clean shirt and come along with us.  
We have begun the grandest revolution the world  
have ever seen,”

The man chosen to represent Onondaga County in the newly created New York State Anti-Slavery Society was Rev. Carlos Smith, pastor of Manlius Presbyterian Church. And as it was for Peter, James and John, life did not get easier for Rev. Smith. His contract as pastor of Manlius Presbyterian was not renewed. Neither was that of his brother, Rev. Stephen Smith, minister at Fayetteville Presbyterian. To take a stand in the early 1830s, as historian Milton Sernett has written, “was to invite trouble.”

There were far more people who stepped out of their fears in this little town to join in the work of emancipation, than I had imagined. They took their biblical faith into the world.

Transfiguration is not a single moment in time past. The invitation continues to go forth. The Holy Spirit continues to embolden us to reject the darkness and extend the hand of mercy and justice.

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Our church traditionally remembers the Transfiguration each year on August 6<sup>th</sup>.

On August 6<sup>th</sup>, of 2013, while I was finishing my book, which I dedicated to my mother, she decided to follow the disciples up the mountain, to see what was going on, and to listen in, something my mother always liked to do.

Well, she decided to stay...and passed into eternity that morning.

God offers us the Saving Story of Jesus again and again and again.

“If today you hear his voice, open your heart.”

Amen!