

February 11, 2018
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Transfiguration)
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

2 Kings 2:1-12
Psalm 50:1-6
2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9

Today is the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, the Sunday before the beginning of Lent, the Sunday when we hear the story of the Transfiguration.

Since the Feast of the Epiphany, we've heard Gospel stories about the human Jesus being revealed as also divine. Today's story features Elijah and Moses, the two most important prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. For Mark's original audience, the story's details would make two things clear: one, that Jesus succeeds them in the line of the prophets; and two, that Jesus exceeds them in importance, because he alone is the Beloved Son of God.

One could argue that, among the Epiphany stories, this one is the most significant. That's because it moves him beyond the confines of his time and place. It locates Jesus in a broader context, one that reaches both before and after his span of life and location on earth. It places Jesus firmly in line with God's plan for humanity, on what we call "the arc of salvation history," which stretches from Genesis to Revelation, from the dawn of humankind to the fully realized Kingdom of God.

We exist in the already / not yet Kingdom of God. That is, the Kingdom of God is here, but it has not yet been attained in all its fullness. Salvation is not really about us as individuals; it's about the God's whole creation. Therefore, it's impossible to separate the arc of salvation from the arc of justice.

In the two years and two months I've been here, you've heard a lot of preaching from this pulpit about justice. It has intensified over the last one year and three months, as our nation's clock seems to be ticking backward on those issues.

This congregation is unique within the Episcopal Church in Connecticut, for many reasons. For one thing, it's probably the youngest. Perhaps related to that, it's also one of the most progressive. That's a big reason people come here. Because this congregation is so progressive, our preachers can be pretty blunt.

Most of my Episcopal clergy friends here in Connecticut find themselves in much different circumstances. While the active Episcopal clergy in Connecticut *are* overwhelmingly progressive, their congregations are less so. I was in a virtual meeting on Wednesday with ten colleagues. Aside from the one who serves at a historically black Episcopal church, all are positioned in that that disconnect. As one of them put it, “65% of the people in my congregation are brokenhearted, and 35% are overjoyed. I used to enjoy preaching. Now I toss and turn all Saturday night, worrying about what I’m going to say on Sunday.” As a solo priest, nearly every week, that colleague must somehow avoid alienating a third of her congregation, while remaining true to her understanding of the Gospel.

We are free from that sort of limitation, and not just in preaching. This provides space to accomplish other things. One of the things I seem to be called to do at St. Thomas’s is meet pastorally with individuals who have been harmed in some way by the church or by people speaking or acting in the name of the church. If I am remembering correctly, every one of those individuals is female and/or queer. I could suppose they sought me out because I am female and queer myself. But that can’t be all there is to it, because I don’t remember having had a single such conversation in my years of ministry in other places. Something different is going on here at St. Thomas’s. And I don’t think it’s just about me.

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, the church season of penitence. I tend to be cautious with the word *penitence*, especially with women, and especially this year.

I want to tell one small story related to a much bigger issue. Last weekend, primed by the #MeToo movement, the testimony against Larry Nassar sent me over the top. I didn’t realize just how over the top I was until Tuesday. I was sitting in a big circle with a group of 15 or 20 Episcopal clergy from this region of Connecticut. Three times I started to talk, only to be talked over by three different older white men. After the third time, I spoke loudly: “Men! Just stop talking!” I let the dead silence rest for a couple of beats and then said what I had to say. Shortly thereafter, I thought to myself that I should be mortified about my outburst, but I wasn’t. I checked in with some women colleagues, and they all cheered. I still don’t feel penitent.

But let’s return to Lent. Let me emphasize first that the result of sin is separation from God. But here’s the thing: our separation from God isn’t necessarily due to sin that *we* have committed. If it is, by all means, we should repent. But the truth is that, for many of us, separation from God is the result of sin committed by others, sin that is sometimes committed in the name of God and the church, in which case the call to repentance is the occasion for shame and manipulation. If that sin does not belong to us, our role isn’t repentance. It’s about understanding our separation from God and hopefully slowly closing the gap.

There are much more horrible examples, but I will say that I experienced institutional marginalization from the church, and a sort of coercive separation from God, labeled sinner as woman and lesbian for reasons I never understood. And so for me, Lent is less about sin and salvation, and more about my relationship with God. After a lot of hard work, God and I are doing pretty well these days. Like a marriage, one’s relationship with God needs tending, and Lent is a good time for a check-in.

In all this, sometimes the church needs to be held accountable for its part in all this. Let's start with worship. Liturgical traditions have long acknowledged that "praying shapes believing." That's why our Book of Common Prayer is so important to us: it brings all Episcopalians in the same prayer that shapes the same belief. If that's true, there must be some affect associated with the Prayer Book's singular use of male imagery for the three persons of the Trinity. Some go so far as to consider that language non-negotiable. I see this as a failure of theological imagination.

It's generally held that the marginalization of queer people is related to the marginalization of women. In the church, expansive language might just be a factor in reducing that marginalization and any resulting separation from God. The effects extend beyond categories of gender or queer; linguistic expansiveness might help everyone grow closer to God.

You may have heard in the news this week that the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, D.C., passed a resolution calling on future Book of Common Prayer revision to include female and non-gendered language for God. The all-male language for God was a roadblock for me when I came to the Episcopal Church. I got past it. But this may explain why I co-sponsored a similar resolution that passed during our November Connecticut convention. Apparently we are too insignificant for Fox News to notice.

Let's test our own theological imaginations. For example, what if we prayed this way: "Our Mother who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." Or this: "in the name of the Mother, and of the Daughter, and of the Holy Spirit." Or even this: "in the name of the loving parent, and of the beloved child, and of the sacred breeze that dances with them."

Or how about this: imagine your own interpretation of God made human flesh. It could be male, or female, or gender-queer. It could be old, or young, or someplace in between. It could be anywhere on any spectrum of human possibility. Imagine their clothing. Imagine walking up a mountain with that person. Imagine arriving at the top, and imagine them transfigured into the divine essence. Two figures appear. Maybe they're Moses and Elijah. Or Ruth and Naomi. Or Mary and Elizabeth. Or the two Marys: the mother of Jesus and Magdalene.

There was a time when, in all my female queerness, I assumed I would never return to Christianity. And yet, here I am. And here you are. We're all situated on this little spot on the arc of salvation history. This strange era in history was made for our progressive church. I like to think we are witnessing the Holy Spirit breathing new life into the old and tired body that is the Church. I like to think God has called us and equipped us to help her out.